

WEEK 3: Listening to Self

SELF-ESTEEM

the cross and christian confidence

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CONTENTS

Preface	8
Introduction	9
1 The concept of self-esteem	15
The need for a definition of self-esteem	16
William James	19
Freudian psychoanalysis	20
Post-Freudian ego psychology and cognitive psychology	23
Client-centred psychotherapy	26
Self-esteem in historical and cultural context	27
Psychological models	31
A definition of self-esteem	32
2 The basis of self-esteem	34
Self-esteem and role	35
Self-esteem and pedigree	36
Self-esteem and performance of roles	38
Investment in social roles	39
The perusia	40
Self-esteem and the love of another	41
Self-esteem and eternal significance	43
Self-esteem and the interpretation of experience	45
Internal-external	46
Stable-unstable	46
Global-specific	47
3 The function of self-esteem	50
Personality disorders	52
Avoidant personality disorder	53
Narcissistic personality disorder	53
Mental illness	54

the present authors' explanation of self-esteem in terms of separation and security is exciting. However, it is not without substantial problems. The Rogerian approach involves laying aside moralism (that is, keeping a set of rules, such as 'shoulds' and 'oughts'). Ideas of 'duty' or 'obligation' are seen as inhibiting self-discovery. The client deliberately and systematically discounts the opinions of others in order to become his or her own judge. 'I did it my way' (Frank Sinatra) sums up this attitude. The ultimate measure of good personal adjustment is held to be autonomy. Autonomy and independence can even be seen as reasons to esteem the self. The client is enabled and encouraged to take responsibility to direct his or her own life. Most important of all, this humanistic theory asserts that 'the innermost core of man's nature is ... positive ... forward-looking, rational and realistic'. In other words, it is assumed that people are good and have an inherent capacity for self-improvement.

At this point the Christian comes into conflict with the secular accounts of human behaviour reviewed so far. These accounts throw valuable light upon the ways in which human psychological pain may be understood and, more importantly, relieved. In some respects their insights touch on the Christian understanding as set out in the Bible. But, while some theories might accommodate the existence of God with little trouble, others blame belief in God (and its associated guilt and fear) for psychopathology and human suffering, and none acknowledges the reality of sin. In the next chapter, we shall begin to examine this conflict in more detail.

Self-esteem: towards a Christian approach

It is natural that Christians should share the secular interest in self-esteem. This is not simply a response to the prevailing worldview; the gospel itself addresses a series of fundamental issues which are directly relevant to the concept of self-esteem. Rightly understood, the gospel first leads to a concern with self-esteem, and then shapes our understanding of this concept in a responsible and distinctively Christian way.

This distinctively Christian approach to self-esteem will lead to affirmation of some aspects of secular approaches and to radical criticism of others. Christians should neither reject nor affirm secular understandings of this issue uncritically. For example, nothing in this book should be taken to imply that secular therapeutic techniques are totally worthless. The genuine insights they contain, although limited, may be seen as resting on common grace (that is, in God's making himself known partially through the natural world and human values, as argued by Paul in *Romans* 1 - 2, and *Acts* 17). In addition, many ideas in western secular culture have been influenced unconsciously by Christian ideas and values. Some ideas that apparently arise within secular contexts actually have their origins in the Judeo-Christian tradition. It is also possible to acknowledge the strengths of a particular

psychological treatment without necessarily accepting all the ramifications of its underlying psychological and philosophical theory. The connection between technique and theory is much looser than is sometimes assumed. If a particular treatment (medical or psychological) is shown to be effective, this does not, on its own, validate the theory on which it is based. There may always be other explanations for the success of the treatment. For example, traditional herbal remedies were once thought to affect 'humours' (any of the four body fluids formerly considered responsible for human health) – an idea no longer taken seriously. Nevertheless, these remedies often worked.

For this reason, Christians should not be deterred from seeking help from or engaging with mainstream psychological approaches. Some of these approaches (for example, cognitive behaviour therapy) appear to work well in some respects. A technique which proves helpful may rest in part on a flawed understanding of human nature. Nevertheless, Christians may still benefit from it at a practical level, while remaining critical about some of the spiritual assumptions on which it is based.

This criticism needs to be applied in four major areas of tension between the Christian gospel and secular understandings of self-esteem:

- the reality of sin
- Christ's command that we should love ourselves
- the Christian emphasis on moral absolutes
- the doctrine of salvation through divine grace, rather than human achievements

The reality of sin

*Lord, do you hear me?
I'm suffering dreadfully. Locked in myself
Prisoner of myself
I hear nothing but my voice, I see nothing but myself
And behind me there is nothing but suffering. Lord, do you hear me?*

Deliver me from my body; it is nothing but hunger, with its thousands of tentacles outstretched to appease its insatiable appetite. Lord, do you hear me?

Deliver me from my heart; when I think that it's overflowing with love, I realize angrily that it is again myself that I love through the loved one. Lord, do you hear me?

Deliver me from my mind; it is full of itself, of its ideas, its opinions; it cannot carry on a dialogue, as no words reach it but its own.

Alone, I am bored, I am weary.

I hate myself.

I am disguised with myself.

For ages I have been turning round inside myself like a sick man in his feverish bed.

Everything seems dark, ugly, horrid.

It's because I can only look through myself.

I feel ready to hate men and the whole world.

It's because I'm disappointed that I cannot love them. I would like to get away.

Walk, run, to another land.

I know that joy exists, I have seen it on singing faces. I know that light exists, I have seen it in radiant eyes.

But, Lord, I cannot get away, for I love my prison and I hate it.

For my prison is myself.

And I love myself. Lord.

I both love and loathe myself.

Lord, I can no longer find my own door. I grope around blindly.

I knock against my own walls, my own boundaries. I hurt myself. I am in pain.

I am in too much pain, and no one knows it, for no one has come in.

I am alone, all alone.

Lord, Lord, do you hear me? Lord, show me my door:

Take me by the hand. Open the door,

Show me the way.

The path leading to joy, to light.

... But ...

But, Lord, do you hear me?

Son, I have heard you. I am sorry for you.

I have long been watching your closed shutters; open them, my light will come in.

I have long been standing at your locked door; open it, you will find me on the threshold.

I am waiting for you, the others are waiting for you,

But you must open,

You must come out.

Why choose to be a prisoner of yourself? You are free.

It is not I who locked the door, it is not I who can open it.

... For it is you, from the inside, who persist in keeping it solidly barred.

(Michel Quoist, 'Lord, do you hear me?')

Sin is the human longing to be like God, and a refusal to acknowledge our human limitations (Gen. 3). It can be seen as an act of rebellion and disobedience, in which humanity refused to accept the fact of its creatureliness, and tried to act as if it were God himself. The idea of sin is deeply counter-cultural within western society. Yet the biblical view is that sin is so deeply ingrained into the human personality that it cannot be ignored or marginalized. It must be acknowledged and addressed: 'If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us' (1 John 1:8).

Sin has both objective and subjective aspects. It causes our relationship with God to be compromised and distorted, just as it causes our perceptions of God and ourselves to be seriously skewed. We *feel* alienated from God because we *are* alienated from God. We *feel* ourselves to be guilty in God's sight because we *are* guilty in his sight. To recognize that we are sinful is to see ourselves from God's perspective, as people who need forgiveness and redemption, and whose judgments concerning themselves, their situation and their identity are distorted.

This idea is found throughout the Bible and throughout the great Christian tradition of engaging with the biblical material. Sin is a multifaceted reality, impacting primarily upon our relationship with God, and as a consequence upon our perception of ourselves and our relationship with God. Sin is about wanting to go our own way, to do our own thing, to make our own judgments (Gen. 3).

It is therefore essential to challenge this human-centred perspective, by seeing things from God's viewpoint. Ideas of self-worth that are based upon an uncritical affirmation of human nature and values are incompatible with the Christian demand that our understanding of our nature, identity and destiny be grounded in God. Sin is a problem for us because it is a problem for God. The difficulty cannot be resolved by denying sin, or by treating it simply as a lack of self-fulfilment. It is something that needs forgiveness, healing and restoration from God's side. We cannot initiate this process of forgiveness and renewal; it is something that God alone can do. Part of the sheer wonder of the Christian gospel is its declaration that God has indeed done this, and that the cross of Christ is the means by which this amazing divine engagement with sin takes place.

As we have stressed, sin affects our relation with God, alienating us from his presence and power. As a result of our alienation from God, sin has a serious impact upon human thought and behaviour. Those looking for indications of sin from human experience need not look very far for confirmation. Nazism and Stalinism, and more recently genocidal events in Africa and parts of Europe, are abiding testimonies to the willingness of one group of human beings totally to eliminate another, convinced of their inferiority. Educated human beings have done serious damage to this planet, usually in pursuit of selfish material gains. Wars, exploitation and exclusion of groups defined by race or gender persist in the modern world, despite alleged advances in human civilization and technology.

The behaviour of societies, however, reflects the nature of their individual members. A sinful society is made up of sinful individuals. As Richard Dawkins points out in his significantly titled book *The Selfish Gene*, which explores aspects of the theory of evolution, there is a sense in which people are disposed to look out only for themselves. People act out of self-interest or extended self-interest. To give an obvious example, Dawkins argues that people are prepared to act for their children, not so much out of pure altruism, but in an evolutionarily determined manner, in order to save their own genes and ensure their survival in the gene pool of future generations.

Yet, as the prayer quoted above expresses, people are often deeply uncomfortable with this very situation. They aspire to a way of being that frees them from such self-interest. Themes of guilt and self-criticism often emerge as part of this personal struggle.

Secular therapies too often ignore this or contradict it by repudiating any sense of personal guilt. In particular, both cognitive therapy and Rogerian therapy seem to minimize the negative personal or individual moral dimensions of the human situation, in rejecting ideas such as blame or guilt, and the vital, related notion of repentance. Thus cognitive therapy assumes that rational thinking is integral to mental health. Yet the English theologian and archbishop William Temple (1881-1944) dismissed such an unwarranted assumption about human nature. Educate people, he argued, and all you do is raise them up and broaden their horizons. But they remain centred on themselves. They may see further; their thoughts, however, remain obstinately centred on their own selfish needs and appetites. Rationality is employed to pursue their own ends. Being rational therefore does not stop people from being immoral. Often it simply allows them to pursue their own agendas and achieve their own goals more effectively, regardless of the effect on others. One of the most tragic aspects of the sinful human situation is that human rationality can be directed towards the pursuit of power and material goods just as well as to the alleviation of the world's problems.

It must be made clear that rationality is important, and that it plays an important role in human well-being. But irrationality is only a tiny fraction of the sinful predicament in which human beings find themselves. Totally rational people are capable of acting in immoral and selfish ways.

The therapeutic approach developed by Carl Rogers works on the basis of the related assumption that if people accept themselves, they will be psychologically healthy human beings. But what if there really is something wrong with human nature? What if we are being asked to accept something that is inherently unacceptable? Can we seriously believe that a Nazi extermination-camp commandant could really accept himself, in the light of all that he had done, seen and ordered? The Christian view is that *repentance*, arising from a genuine sense of sorrow and contrition, must be an

integral element of authentic self-acceptance.

Yet repentance plays an insignificant part in secular approaches to counselling and psychology. It is often regarded as an unhelpful or unacceptable notion. This view thus denies to individuals the possibility of coping fully with their past, knowing that it has been set behind them and forgiven.

In turning to deal with the biblical view of human nature, we encounter a refreshing and direct realism. Humanity is sinful. Human beings are separated from God on account of sin: 'your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you' (Is. 59:2).

We can explore three biblical images that develop this theme of separation from God.

First, *alienation from God*. Paul reminds his readers that they were once separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world' (Eph. 2:12). Sin is like being at war with God (Eph. 2:14-16). Yet that hostility can be overcome. Christ is our peace, in that he has broken down the hostility between ourselves and God. He has made it possible for us to be reconciled to God, so that our alienation is abolished (2 Cor. 5:19). Through Christ, we have been restored to fellowship with God.

Secondly, *expulsion from paradise*. On account of sin, Adam and Eve were expelled from Eden (Gen. 3:24). There could be no return to Eden; the way was blocked by the cherubim and flaming sword. These are powerful images of the separation between God and humanity. Sin is a barrier between ourselves and paradise, and the God who created us to dwell there. We have become 'foreigners and aliens' (Eph. 2:19), wandering the face of the earth in lonely isolation. Yet, through faith, we enter into a community - the people of God. Through Christ we are now 'fellow-citizens with God's people and members of God's household' (Eph. 2:19). Notice again how salvation is understood as being restored to fellowship with God. The barriers of separation have been overcome and removed. Heaven can thus be seen as our final and permanent restoration to the presence of God.

An important related idea is that of *refection*. The expulsion of

Adam and Eve from Eden is an aspect of their rejection by God. On account of their sin, they are denied access to the presence of God and to the blessings he had intended for them. Sin excludes us from the fellowship of God. This does not arise on account of some human inability to find God. It is a result of disobedience, a decision to reject God. In order for the situation to be changed and for fellowship to be restored, God must be able to accept those whom he has rejected. Once more, the importance of the theme of *reconciliation* will be obvious. Through the saving death of Christ on the cross, God accepts those who were once unacceptable, and brings close those who were far away.

Thirdly, *going our own way*. 'We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way' (Is. 53:6). Choosing to go our own way inevitably means departing both from God's way and from God himself. Our desire for autonomy leads us to take paths of our own choosing which lead away from the God who created us. Perhaps one of Jesus' most memorable parables concerns a son who decides to go his own way (Luke 15:11-24). That act of 'going his own way' meant that the son decided to leave his father's presence and ignore his will and purposes. Eventually, the son deeply regretted his action and longed to be restored to his father's presence. The story of the son's restoration to fellowship with his father is one of the most moving and powerful narratives in Scripture. The importance in this context will be clear: going our own way means going away from God, and becoming separated from him.

Biblical images of sin such as these lead us to an understanding that the core consequences of sin are separation from God at the *physical, personal and moral level*. At the *physical level*, we are cut off from God on account of death, which is an integral aspect of sin. Through faith, we are assured of eternal life, in which we shall never again experience separation from God. 'For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord' (Rom. 6:23). At the *personal level*, our relationship of love and trust with God has been spoiled.

At the *moral level*, we are no longer in good standing with God. This is expressed in the Bible in terms of our unrighteousness in the light of God's holiness and justice: 'the LORD Almighty will be

exalted by his justice, and the holy God will show himself holy by his righteousness' (Is. 5:16). The importance of the concept of righteousness, and its relationship to self-esteem, will be discussed in the next chapter.

Obviously, a real tension exists between the inherent optimism of many secular psychotherapies and what the American writer Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971) described as 'Christian realism'. This realism recognizes the reality and seriousness of human sin in the face of the delusions of those who wish to overlook it. In this connection, it is of interest to note that there is evidence to suggest that depressed people may actually have a *more* realistic grasp of their situation than their 'normal' counterparts, whose mental health is somehow protected by an optimistic bias.

A responsible Christian approach to self-esteem must steep itself in the harsh fact of sin. Secular therapies may find the idea of sin to be 'unhelpful'; but if it is *true*, it cannot be ignored in any responsible and reliable evaluation of the human situation.

Christ's command that we should lose ourselves

A second area of tension is indicated by Christ's emphasis upon self-denial. This major New Testament theme plays a central role in all Christian thinking on holiness, whether catholic or evangelical. It is of such significance that it must be given considerable weight in any discussion of self-esteem. 'Whoever tries to keep his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life will preserve it' (Luke 17:33). The Bible asks us to lose our lives in order to gain them. We are called to servanthood, humility and obedience, and to a will that is not our own. We are to give up attempts to control our own destiny, and trust ourselves to God's will for us (Luke 22:42). We are thus called away from the autonomy that is so greatly prized by Rogers and others.

Let us at this point consider the nature of the 'original sin' of Genesis 3. Underlying the famous story of the rebellion of Adam and Eve against God is the motif of self-sufficiency. If you eat of the fruit of this tree, you will be like God. You will be able to decide for yourself what is right and wrong. You can manage without God. A basic feature of fallen human nature is the craving

for autonomy, the passionate pursuit of the cult of self-sufficiency. From their mother's knee upwards, many people are taught that any form of dependency is unhealthy and unwholesome. These attitudes are further reinforced by the pressures of modern western society with its emphasis upon individual success.

Now it must be clear that the Christian idea of losing oneself has nothing to do with the Buddhist idea of dissolving into an impersonal mass. At its heart, the gospel is concerned with two competing ideas of freedom and autonomy. We could describe them as follows.

First, the view that *we are masters of our own souls*. Nothing compromises our freedom except obstacles that we needlessly place in the way of that autonomy. Historically, this approach is usually described as Pelagian, after the fourth-century writer Pelagius, who emphasized the total freedom and responsibility of humans.

Secondly, the view that *our natural freedom is a spurious autonomy*. It is compromised by sin, which places severe, yet largely unrecognized, limitations upon our freedom. We labour under the delusion that we are free, and yet we are really in bondage. This outlook is associated with Augustine of Hippo, Pelagius' most acute and discerning critic.

Augustine comes much closer than Pelagius to Christ's demand that we lose ourselves in order to find ourselves. We must surrender our natural fallen freedom, a freedom tainted and compromised by sin even if we do not realize it. As Augustine stressed, this 'freedom' is in reality only a freedom to serve sin and remain trapped in our sinful situation. And in its place, we are to receive – as a gift – a real freedom, which comes only from being liberated from the bondage of sin. Christian writers have always recognized the central paradox of Christian obedience: it is only by serving God that we have perfect freedom. It is only by becoming God's slaves that we become free men and women.

This theme occurs throughout Scripture. To give a helpful example: we are asked to give up our spurious idea of 'life' as mere biological existence that must end in physical death. And having done this, we can receive a *new life – eternal life* – which alone is 'life ... in all its fullness' (John 10:10, Revised English Bible). We lose the shadow in order to gain the reality. We abandon what is

temporary and transient in order to gain what is permanent and eternal.

Scripture playfully compares our natural and fallen freedom with that of a flock of sheep. Time and time again, sinners are compared to sheep, who are utterly helpless unless they are fortunate enough to be tended by a caring shepherd (Ps. 23; Luke 15:3–7; John 10:1–15). Sheep possess autonomy. Yet in exercising that freedom, all they manage to do is get lost and fall into danger. Indeed, Scripture uses the image of sheep without a shepherd to describe people who are totally lost and bewildered (Zech. 10:2; Mark 6:34). Freedom is no guarantee of being able to cope with life. We need to be guided and assisted and liberated from the tyranny of sin.

It is perhaps at this point that the full wonder of the Christian doctrine of redemption becomes apparent. The Shepherd gives up his life in order that his sheep may live. Christ dies in order that we who merely exist may have life in all its fullness. Christ willingly sets his own life to one side so that we can live. As St Paul points out, one of the greatest paradoxes of faith is that only the person who has died is freed from sin (Rom. 6:7). Yet in dying to sin – that is, in dying to our natural state of sin, mortality and transience – we are born again to eternal life. We must therefore consider ourselves as 'dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus' (Rom. 6:11).

Secular approaches assume that we do not need to question the way we are. We need not seek anything beyond the realm of this world. And, for the Christian, this inevitably means that those who rely upon secular therapies will remain captive to sin. Paradoxically, such approaches can be allies of sin, in that they prevent us from escaping from its clutches, asserting that there is no bondage in the first place. Once more, the importance of the Christian insistence upon the reality of sin will become clear. No Christian can rest content with this shallow assessment of the human predicament.

The Christian emphasis upon absolute moral standards

Cognitive behaviour therapy and Rogerian approaches deny the existence and helpfulness of absolute moral standards. These

approaches see the aim for high absolute moral standards as pathological; instead, they argue, we should lower our standards to be 'realistic' and 'attainable'. There is an assumption that perfection is unattainable. Thus, striving for perfection can only bring disappointment and frustration, whereas the actual achievement of more attainable goals gives a sense of success, a beneficial experience that enhances self-esteem.

Yet Christ adopts a rather different approach. In Matthew's account of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus describes himself as the ultimate fulfilment of the Old Testament law (itself underpinned by the moral absolutes enshrined in the Ten Commandments). 'Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect' (Matt. 5:48). This absolute demand cannot be ignored. For Christians, absolute moral standards cannot be regarded as arbitrary pragmatic human rules of thumb, but only as something established by God. They reflect something real about the nature of God and the world he created. They are not mere human social conventions.

Underlying this tension between Christian and secular approaches is a real difference in worldviews. The secular therapist views success as something that enhances self-esteem; thus it is to be commended. The Christian sees failure as something of, if anything, more potential value, bringing home to us our weakness and frailty and encouraging us to rely more upon the grace of God, rather than upon our own resources and ability.

A paradigm for this transformation of failure experiences is the relationship between Jesus and Peter, vividly revealed in the Gospel narratives. Peter is a chronic mistake-maker. His impulsive and argumentative behaviour gets him into trouble on numerous occasions (see for instance Matt. 14:28-31; Mark 8:31-33; John 13:6-11; 18:10-11). His human weaknesses reach a climax in his denial of Jesus three times in the house of the high priest.

Now Peter was sitting out in the courtyard, and a servant girl came to him. 'You also were with Jesus of Galilee,' she said.

But he denied it before them all. 'I don't know what you're talking about,' he said.

Then he went out to the gateway, where another girl saw

him and said to the people there, 'This fellow was with Jesus of Nazareth.'

He denied it again, with an oath: 'I don't know the man!'

After a little while, those standing there went up to Peter and said, 'Surely you are one of them, for your accent gives you away.'

Then he began to call down curses on himself and he swore to them, 'I don't know the man!'

Immediately a cock crowed. Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken: 'Before the cock crows, you will disown me three times.' And he went outside and wept bitterly (Matt. 26:69-75).

Peter is overwhelmed with remorse. In John's account, after the resurrection, Jesus sensitively allows Peter to use this remorse to good effect, asking Peter to stare his love for him three times. After what is essentially an act of repentance on Peter's part, Jesus does him the unparalleled honour of entrusting the church into his hands:

... Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these?'

'Yes, Lord,' he said, 'you know that I love you.'

Jesus said, 'Feed my lambs.'

Again Jesus said, 'Simon son of John, do you truly love me?'

He answered, 'Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.'

Jesus said, 'Take care of my sheep.'

The third time he said to him, 'Simon son of John, do you love me?'

Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, 'Do you love me?' He said, 'Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.'

Jesus said, 'Feed my sheep' (John 21:15-17).

The Christian is thus enabled to value and learn from failure. The secular therapist has some difficulty with failure and adopts the somewhat defeatist attitude of lowering standards in order that

everyone may succeed. But at the heart of the gospel lies the insight that God's standards are not some trivial human invention that can be discarded at will. The secular therapist is, in effect, obliged to say something like, 'If at first you don't succeed, change the rules!' The Christian can say with confidence that we may learn more about ourselves and about God by keeping the rules just the way they are.

In the eyes of the world, failure is linked with rejection. To fail at a task or in a role is likely to mean rejection by important others. The Christian perspective is radically different. The love of God was made known in an act of apparent failure – the death of Christ. What the world counts as failure is transfigured by God's reversal of the world's standards. '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' (1 Cor. 1:27–29). In short, God chose what the world rejected and despised as failure (1 Pet. 2:6–7).

We shall explore some of the issues posed by the persistence of sin in believers in the following chapter. Our attention now turns briefly to the doctrine of grace.

Salvation by divine grace, not by human achievements

The Reformation rediscovered that we cannot base our salvation, acceptability to ourselves or God, on our works or achievements. The attitude of Jesus to such things as wealth, status, achievements, the love of others and pedigree make this clear.

Wealth. It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God' (Matt. 19:24). Jesus discounts the value of riches, even seeing them as an impediment to entering the kingdom of God. Money does not influence his estimation of people.

Reputation. 'Woe to you when all men speak well of you' (Luke 6:26). Jesus declares that a person's reputation among his or her peers does not affect God's regard for the person.

Possessions. 'You fool! This very night your life will be

demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?' This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God' (Luke 12:20–21). The accumulation of possessions may enhance someone's prestige in the world – but it cures no ills with God.

Wisdom. 'Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?' (1 Cor. 1:20). The wisdom that gives us status in the eyes of the world has little value in the sight of God.

In the cognitive behavioural model (and other related psychotherapeutic approaches), external achievements are seen as enhancing self-esteem. While such approaches recognize that simply trying to buy love or approval through achievement is misguided, if not impossible, perceived external success remains a vital component of self-esteem for them. There is no doubt that adequate role assumption *does* relate to acceptance by other people, precisely because it gives us a place in the social network.

Jesus' radical approach undercuts this reliance on achievement and is in fact echoed in some secular psychotherapeutic approaches (e.g. the Jungian), which regard over-investment in achievement as unhealthy. However, while such therapies advocate laying aside spurious sources of self-esteem, they do not say what should be put in their place. The gospel remedies this deficiency, as we shall see. It does not merely mount a sustained critique of the role of human achievement in relation to self-esteem; it offers a new basis for that self-esteem.

The idea of 'justification by works' is important in this respect. Just as some Jews appear to have thought that one could find acceptance with God by rigorously observing the law of Moses, so many contemporary therapeutic approaches assume that self-acceptance can rest upon success and achievement. The quest for acceptability, to oneself or in the sight of others, often proceeds on the belief that such acceptance is contingent, at least in part, upon adequate role behaviour – such as being a good mother, a successful athlete, a creative artist, or someone others will look up to. This is a more subtle form of justification by works than keeping a set of rules or passing a set of tests. Yet the entire thrust of the Christian doctrine of grace is that acceptance – both in our own

eyes and in God's – cannot depend upon anything we do.

What, then, are we to make of the findings reviewed earlier in this book? It seems that much human misery centres around failure to value ourselves and finds its extreme in suicide and self-destructive behaviour. Christians are not exempt from this experience. Some may even feed their own negative self-esteem by an excessive appeal to scriptural passages that emphasize sin, guilt and alienation. Others may find that negative self-esteem is reinforced by a church culture that majors on criticism and exhortation, rather than on affirmation, from the pulpit.

As we have seen, Christianity places strong emphasis upon the reality of sin, the desirability of self-loss and dependence, the existence of absolute moral standards, the inability of people to meet these standards through their own efforts, and the need for repentance. This emphasis might be taken to mean that Christianity undervalues people or perpetuates emotional pain, inner conflict and guilt – perhaps even contributing to the genesis of mental illness. Yet this is not the case.

We have yet to consider the Christian response to such matters as sin and guilt – the person of Jesus Christ and his redeeming work upon the cross. Through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God bridges the seemingly absolute gap between the reality of human sin, hopelessness and helplessness, and his own absolute moral purity and holiness. He purges our guilt, which we could never purge ourselves. Through the cross, God affirms us when we are undeserving of affirmation. He judges us worthy when we honestly and accurately see ourselves as unworthy. He meets our basic need for attachment despite the fact that we are separated from him.

This naturally brings us to a discussion of the doctrine of grace – the assertion that God has met us and fulfilled us in Christ. Our separation from God, personal, moral and physical, has been abolished through the work of Christ on the cross, which we accept and make our own through faith. We now consider how the cross of Christ provides the objective basis for Christian self-esteem.

The cross: the objective basis of self-esteem

One of the major themes resounding throughout the Christian discussion of redemption is that of God's justice and righteousness. God does not redeem us in some arbitrary and haphazard manner, but in a way that both accords with and declares his righteousness. It is therefore natural that the imagery and language of the lawcourt should find its way into Christian discourse about the meaning of the cross.

The cross and sin

Perhaps one of the most important aspects of this way of approaching the cross relates to sin. Sin can be understood in moral, legal or penal terms. It is an offence against God. Sin is not a trivial offence, like being rude to someone. Sin violates the moral order of the creation established by God himself at the foundation of the world. Sin tears the moral fabric of the creation, a structure that reflects God's nature.

So how can God forgive human sin without himself violating that moral order? Why can't God just forgive sin and have done with it? Why not just declare that all sin, past, present and future, is cancelled and forgiven? Because this would be to treat sin in the

most shockingly shallow manner. It would deny its seriousness. It would fail to safeguard the creation against corruption and condemnation. It would make a mockery of justice, pretending that sin is just some private matter, of no public relevance.

It is here that the cross becomes of central importance. It condemns sin, showing up its full seriousness. Sin, which might seem a trivial issue, leads to the state of affairs where God himself ends up being crucified. So perverted and confused has the moral ordering of the creation become on account of human sin that the creation ends up attempting to destroy its Creator. Something radical has to be done to restore the harmony of the world, to cancel its guilt in order that it may start again, and to break the power of disruptive forces within.

Yet so deeply is the creation, and supremely human nature, enmeshed in sin that it cannot get itself out of its guilt-ridden situation. People are trapped, wallowing around in a mud pit of introspective self-centredness. So great is our accumulation of sin, guilt and inherited punishment that we cannot hope to break free. Like a bad debt, it keeps getting bigger, with no hope of wiping it out and starting all over again. A web of guilt has been spun from which there is no escape. Only action from outside can enable us to break free from this self-imposed prison.

The cross marks a turning-point in this situation. It ends our enmity with God. God's relation to us changes – and thus enables our relationship with him to change. Christ broke down the barrier sin posed to our friendship with God. The temple curtain at Jerusalem symbolized for many the inability of ordinary people to enter into God's presence – hence their separation from God. This curtain was torn at the time of Christ's death. The tearing itself is a powerful symbol of the way the death of Christ broke down the barrier of sin that prevented us from coming into God's presence. The way has been opened for us to return to God. Separation from God can become reconciliation to God, and thus attachment to God.

In Jesus Christ, God has taken upon himself the burden of, human guilt. Christ is the one who bore the weight of human sin upon his lonely and tired shoulders at Calvary (Is. 53:10–12; 1 Pet. 2:24). 'God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in

him we might become the righteousness of God' (2 Cor. 5:21). Christ was content to be reckoned among sinners in order to redeem sinners (Is. 53:12). 'He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed' (1 Pet. 2:24). The cross brings home both the seriousness of sin and the power and purpose of God to engage with it, eventually to destroy it. In the cross we see *real* forgiveness of *real* sins – our sins. The initiative was from God; the response must be from us. God moved so that we can move. God loved us in order that we might love him.

Although holy and guiltless in himself, Jesus was thus cut off from God by the moral weight of human sin. He chose to become sin in order that we might become righteous in the sight of God. The dying Christ took sin, which causes a moral separation between ourselves and God, upon himself, thus removing this barrier between God and us. No obstacle now prevents our being attached to God.

But Jesus also became physically separated from God. He felt the full weight of this separation, as we see clearly in the dreadful cry of dereliction: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Mark 15:34). Jesus here shared our separation from God, sensing the pain and loneliness of his absence. Through the cross of Christ, this vital aspect of separation from God is dealt with. Christ became separated from God in order that we might become re-attached to him through faith in what Christ achieved.

God thus did what only he could do. He took away both the guilt and the power of human sin. He was under no obligation to do so. But in his mercy and compassion, he chose to act in this way. At no point is his righteousness compromised. Such is his love for us that he takes upon himself the pain and suffering which, by rights, should have been ours. As Paul once wrote, 'I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me' (Gal. 2:20).

But how are we to understand the mystery of just how the cross brings this about? There are three main ways of making sense of what happened.

First, *representation*. Christ is here understood to be the covenant representative of humanity. Through faith, we come to

stand within the covenant between God and humanity. All that Christ has won for us through the cross is available to us on account of the covenant. Just as God entered into a covenant with his people Israel, so he has entered into a covenant with his church. Christ, by his obedience upon the cross, represents his covenant people, winning benefits for them as their representative. By coming to faith, individuals share in all covenant benefits won by Christ through his cross and resurrection – including the full and free forgiveness of our sins.

Secondly, *participation*. Through faith, believers participate in the risen Christ. They are 'in Christ', to use Paul's famous phrase. They are caught up in him and share in his risen life. As a result of this, they share in all the benefits won by Christ through his obedience upon the cross. Participating in Christ thus entails the forgiveness of our sins and sharing in his righteousness.

Thirdly, *substitution*. Christ is here understood to be our substitute, the one who goes to the cross in our place. There is no limit to the extent to which Christ is prepared to identify with us. We ought to have been crucified on account of our sins. Christ is crucified in our place. God allows Christ to stand in our place, taking our guilt upon himself, so that his righteousness – won by obedience upon the cross – might become ours. Christ enters into our human situation, sharing its sorrows, its pain and its guilt. And all these are brought to the cross. They are nailed to that cross, along with the one who bears them for us. By his wounds we are healed.

The cross, then, establishes the objective basis of Christian self-esteem. It is here that God has established his relationship with us. Sin has been dealt with. Where secular psychological theories close their eyes to the reality, the seriousness and the power of sin, the gospel acknowledges them – but strongly affirms the reality, the seriousness and the power of the cross of Christ to defeat sin. We may rest assured that all that is necessary for self-esteem has been done – and done extremely well! – by God through Christ on the cross.

Despite this, some people still have difficulty with the idea that sinners can be acceptable in the sight of God. How, they ask, can God value us when we are still sinners? In view of the importance

of this question, we shall answer it in full, looking at the relevance of the doctrine of justification by faith in some detail. This doctrine, of central importance to the writings of St Paul, deals with the question of how sinners can find acceptance in the sight of a righteous and holy God. Paul Tillich, a twentieth-century American writer, declared that the doctrine of justification by faith means 'accepting that you are accepted, despite being unacceptable'. We shall see how this is the case.

Images of wholeness: the New Testament on salvation

The New Testament uses a rich range of powerful images to express what God has done for us in Christ. Each of these images casts light on a different facet of the Christian understanding of the newness of life that comes about through faith. One of the central ideas of the New Testament is that a radical change in our status comes about when faith unites us to Christ. Each image explored here is charged with relevance for a properly Christian understanding of self-esteem.

Ransomed by Christ

As he neared the end of his life, Christ told his disciples that he had come to give his life as a ransom for many' (Mark 10:45). This is a powerful way of making sense of the meaning of the cross. It immediately conveys the idea of liberation – being set free from prison or bondage – just as Christians have been set free from bondage to sin and the fear of death and enter into the glorious liberty of the children of God.

But it implies more than that. It also points to the payment of a price so that we may go free. A ransom is a payment that secures someone's liberation. And the New Testament affirms that the price paid for our redemption is the death of the Son of God. The idea of a ransom price holds the key to some vital Christian insights into self-esteem.

Imagine that someone has been captured and held for ransom by a group of international kidnappers. The price set for her release is enormous. Initially, she believes that she can raise the funds.

However, she gradually realizes that she is too poor. A sense of despair and despondency sets in. She begins to face up to the fact that she may never be released, resigning herself to her fate.

Yet a group of friends has resolved to do something to help. Unknown to her, they join together to raise the substantial sum of money demanded for her release. To her amazement and joy, the ransom demand is paid. She is freed!

That story is simple, and yet it offers us invaluable insights into how our self-esteem can and should be grounded in the cross of Christ. The gospel tells us that we are held captive by a coalition of forces, such as sin and death. We are unable to break free from them. Like kidnappers, they hold us for ransom and we are unable to pay that ransom demand. As a result, we are in a hopeless situation. We are doomed to remain in bondage – unless someone else cares for us enough to work for our release.

Imagine the change in this woman's self-esteem. Initially, it sinks to rock bottom when she discovers that she cannot change her situation. In her own eyes, she is devoid of value. But then the situation changes radically. She discovers that she is valued by others. Her self-worth now rests on the attitude of others towards her – an attitude expressed in their determination to help and their willingness to raise the substantial sum of money involved.

The gospel declares that God is both determined to save us and prepared to pay the price salvation entails. Paul reminded his Corinthian readers that they had been bought at the price of the death of the Son of God (1 Cor. 6:20; 7:23). God values us so much that he gave his own Son that we might be free.

Reconciliation

A similar line of thought arises from another of Paul's central ideas: reconciliation. 'God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ' (2 Cor. 5:19). The image is that of a broken personal relationship, which needs to be healed. Reconciliation would replace a state of enmity with God by a state of friendship and trust. Christianity, to put it very simply, is about becoming a friend of God, with all that true friendship implies.

Earlier we noted how our self-esteem was partly determined by

the social group with which we associate. Our peer group affects the way we view ourselves, just as it affects the way others regard us. To belong to the *right* club, the *right* crowd or the *right* set is seen by many as of central importance to one's personal image and social standing. Reconciliation allows Christians to speak of themselves as being friends with God, valuing themselves in consequence. The parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–24), in which the son and father meet halfway, provides a marvellous example of the importance of reconciliation and hints at its implications for the reconciled son's self-esteem. It is only when he is reconciled that his father orders the fattened calf to be killed for a celebratory feast. Think of what that must have done for the wayward son's self-esteem!

But there is more to this image. Imagine a child waking up in the middle of the night, frightened of the dark. Anxiously, he calls for his mother. She comes to his bedside, holds him by the hand, and says, 'There, there. It's all right'. But what is all right? The really important thing here is that the child, who had felt separated from his mother, can now draw comfort from her presence. Things are 'all right' because she is there. She is by his side, and that enables him to cope with the dark and the unknown threats of the night. 'Right' here is not a moral concept; it is a rightness of presence. 'Things are right, now that I am here.'

Reconciliation is about our being restored to the comforting presence of God. It is about enabling us to face the unknown future in the presence of a known and loved God. The separation resulting from sin is ended; in its place, we are enabled to experience and delight in the presence and power of God. We shall explore further in the next chapter the idea of the parental care of God.

Salvation

The key term 'salvation' is used frequently in the New Testament (see Acts 13:26; Eph. 1:13; Heb. 1:14). The way the idea is used in the New Testament (where the verb is generally in the future tense) suggests that it should be thought of as a future event – something still to happen, although it may have begun to happen

in the present. The basic idea is that of deliverance, preservation or rescue from a dangerous situation. The verb is used outside the New Testament to refer to being saved from death by the intervention of a rescuer, or to being cured of a deadly illness. It can also refer to being kept in good health. The Jewish historian Josephus used the word *salvation* to refer to the deliverance of the Israelites from Egyptian bondage.

The concept suggests two ideas. First, one may be *rescued or delivered from a dangerous situation* – just as the Israelites were delivered from their captivity in Egypt at the time of the exodus. So Christ is understood to deliver us from the fear of death and the power of sin. The name 'Jesus' means 'God saves' – and it is clear that the New Testament means 'saves from sin' (Matt. 1:21 is important here).

The second idea is that of *wholeness or health*. There is a very close relation between the ideas of salvation and wholeness. In many languages, the words for 'health' and 'salvation' are one and the same. Thus it is sometimes difficult to know whether a passage should be translated in terms of salvation or of wholeness. For example, should the Greek of Mark 5:34 be translated as 'Your faith has made you whole' or 'Your faith has saved you? This close association of ideas was also found in the English language until the time of the Norman Conquest in 1066. The Old English word for 'salvation' (*hœl*) – note the similarity to the modern English words *heel* and *health*) was replaced by the Latin form *salvation* at that time, with the result that the English-speaking world has lost this close association of both the words and the concepts. But in some other modern languages, this association remains. Let us explore its meaning.

When people who have been ill are healed, they are restored to their former state of health, of wholeness. The creation accounts (Gen. 1–2) make it clear that God created us in a state of wholeness, and this wholeness was lost through the fall (Gen. 3). Just as healing involves restoration to health, so salvation involves restoration to wholeness – restoration to the state in which we were first created by God. Paul draws attention to the relation between the first Adam and the second (Christ): through Adam we lost our integrity before God; through Christ that integrity can be regained

and restored. In many respects the gospel is like a medicine – something that heals us even though we don't fully understand how it works.

It is helpful to notice the close link between sin and disease in the Gospels (as in Matt. 9:8). Jesus healed people and forgave their sins, and both activities are aspects of the restoration to wholeness which is God's gift to us in Christ.

This, then, outlines the basic meaning of salvation. But what bearing does it have on self-esteem? How does thinking about the meaning of salvation encourage us to value ourselves in a properly Christian manner?

Illness is a central biblical model for sin. Sin is like a disease, which God cures through the work of Christ on the cross. Most of us feel profoundly unworthy of the love of God on account of our selfishness and guilt. For many Christians, a proper Christian sense of self-worth is fatally compromised through sin. How can God value someone like me when I am a sinner? How can God really love someone as worthless as me, tainted and contaminated by my sin?

The Christian doctrine of salvation has some vitally important insights to offer here. First, it affirms that we really are sinners – but sinners in the process of being renewed and transformed. Augustine of Hippo, a noted early Christian writer, once likened the church to a hospital. It is a community of sick people, united by their willingness to acknowledge their sin and by their hope and trust in the skill of the physicians to whose care they are committed. The sin that is now so real and obvious an aspect of their lives will one day be fully removed. But God can love his people now. He can anticipate the final removal of our sin and love us now in the light of what we will be on that final day.

So Christian self-esteem should not be compromised by an awareness of sin. We Christians should not despise or hate ourselves on account of the continuing presence of sin in our lives. A sense of guilt is appropriate for the sins we commit while we are Christians. But those sins can be confessed and forgiven. After that, we need not feel guilty for being sinners. As we have emphasized, the gospel affirms that we are *forgiven sinners*. To retain a sense of guilt for being sinners is to overlook the vital fact

of our forgiveness! We can also cripple our spiritual growth through failing to realize that the penalty of sin has been paid through the cross, so that we labour under the delusion that we are somehow being asked to pay that penalty ourselves. Our sin has been nailed to the cross of Christ, and it should remain there.

God makes a vital distinction between sin and the sinner, promising to deliver us from the penalty, power and presence of sin. That penalty has been paid through the cross of Christ. That power is being broken through the presence of the risen Christ in our lives.

And finally, on the last day, we shall be freed once and for all from the presence of sin. But in the meantime, we must learn to accept that we are like sick people, entrusted to the care of a loving and healing God, just as the good Samaritan entrusted his wounded friend to the care of the innkeeper (Luke 10:25-37). God knows that we are ill and has promised to heal us. And we must learn to value ourselves responsibly, by seeing beyond our sinful present to our redeemed future.

Justification by faith

To speak of 'justification by faith' is immediately to run into a serious difficulty. The phrase sounds strange to modern ears. 'Justification' is most commonly understood today as a defence of one's position in an argument or legal case, or as achieving a straight right-hand edge in a block of text by varying the space between words. So how can a term most familiar from the worlds of justice and word-processing have any real relevance for Christian self-esteem?

The English word *justification*, in its theological sense, is an attempt to denote the Old Testament idea of being 'right before God'. Through a complex tradition of translation and interpretation - from Hebrew to Greek, from Greek to Latin, and finally from Latin to English - *justification* has come to refer to the status of being righteous in the sight of God. To be justified is to be right with God. But this idea of 'being right with God' is relational rather than moral. It is primarily about the way in which we relate to God, not about any moral or ethical qualities we may

possess. For the German Reformer Martin Luther (1483-1546), to have faith was to be right with God - that is, to live in an attitude of trust in God. Faith is the right way to live in the sight of God. It may therefore be helpful to paraphrase the word *justification*, perhaps as 'a state of being right with God'. Similarly, 'to be justified' could be paraphrased as 'to be put in a right relationship with God'.

Not only is the phrase 'justification by faith' unfamiliar; it is also open to misunderstanding. The phrase might appear to mean that we are justified on account of our faith. In other words, human faith is the basis of God's decision to grant us the status of being righteous in his sight. If this were the case, this would amount to a doctrine of justification by works, with faith being seen merely as a special type of good work. Faith would be something we achieve.

In fact, the phrase 'justification by faith' has a quite different meaning, which is perhaps best understood by considering a Latin phrase the German Reformer Philipp Melancthon (1497-1560) used in explaining it. We are justified *propter Christum per fidem* - that is, on account of Christ, through faith. The basis of God's decision to place us in a right relationship with him lies in Jesus Christ himself. We are justified on account of his obedience during his lifetime and his death upon the cross. It is because of him, and not because of anything we have done or will do, that we are made right with God. But the means by which we are justified is faith. Faith is like a channel through which the benefits of Christ flow to us.

We are not justified on account of faith; we are justified through faith. It is the work of Christ, not our faith, that is the foundation of justification. Faith is the means by which the work of Christ is applied to our lives. This is no doctrine of justification on account of human achievement; it is a doctrine of justification on account of what Christ has achieved for us through his cross and resurrection. It is faith in Christ, not faith in our own faith, that places us in a right relationship with God.

But the doctrine implies still more than this. Faith is itself a gift of God.

In other words, both the external foundation and the internal means of appropriation of justification are God-given. Faith is not

something we can achieve; it is something achieved within us by God. This assertion might seem bewildering if faith is simply understood as 'assent to the existence of God', or 'belief in the key doctrines of Christianity'. However, the full Christian understanding of faith embraces far more than this. Faith unites us to Christ and all his benefits. Everything necessary for salvation has been done, and done well, by God.

So how does the doctrine of justification by faith relate to self-esteem? The key linking concept is that of *righteousness*. For the Christian, it may be helpful to think of positive self-esteem as a psychological sign of having comprehended that one is counted as right with God, and thus with oneself.

Earlier, we noted a distinction between internal and external styles of attribution in relation to self-esteem. The Greek verb translated 'to justify' really has the sense 'to count someone as righteous', or 'to esteem someone as righteous'. There are two quite different ways of thinking about the idea of being justified in the sight of God. The first way involves an internal style of attribution, in which the following question is asked: 'What is it about *me* that would allow anyone to count *me* as righteous?' This way of thinking can lead to despair if the person's self-view is negative, and to an unmerited conceit if the person holds a good opinion of himself or herself.

The internal-attribution style naturally leads to the triumphalist view that we can do something to establish our righteousness. If we can justify ourselves by works (the Pelagian idea), our emotional investment tends to fall on our achievements and spurs us on to attempt to achieve more. Our sense of personal security and esteem thus comes to rest upon what we do and the way we feel about it.

The second approach concerns an external style of attribution, in which the question being asked is: 'What is it about *God* that makes him see *me* as righteous?' This style of attribution creates a sense of expectancy for action on the part of God, rather than a feeling that *we* ought to be achieving something. This vital shift in the frame of reference moves us away from a human-centred, works-orientated approach to our personal worth, and instead points us firmly towards a God-centred, faith-orientated approach.

(As we noted earlier, 'faith' does not mean a human work, but a work or gift of God within us.)

Justification is thus about our status in the sight of God. It is about the way we are viewed by that most significant of all others – God. The Greek word translated 'righteousness' is not simply a moral idea. It is far more than that, embracing central Christian ideas such as 'being in a right relationship with God' and 'being regarded as of worth by God'. Believers thus regard themselves (rightly) as sinners; but in the sight of God, they are also righteous on account of their justification. God reckons believers as righteous on account of their faith. Through faith, the believer is clothed with the righteousness of Christ, in much the same way, Luther suggests, as Ezekiel 16:8 speaks of God covering our nakedness with his garment. For Luther, faith is the right (or righteous) relationship to God. Sin and righteousness thus coexist; we remain sinners inwardly, but we are righteous extrinsically in the sight of God. By confessing our sins in faith, we stand in a right and righteous relationship with God. From our own perspective we are sinners; but in the perspective of God we are righteous.

Now the saints are always aware of their sin and seek righteousness from God in accordance with his mercy. And for this very reason, they are regarded as righteous by God. Thus in their own eyes (and in reality!) they are sinners – but in the eyes of God they are righteous, because he reckons them as such on account of their confession of their sin. In reality they are sinners; but they are righteous by the imputation of a merciful God. They are unknowingly righteous, and knowingly sinners. They are sinners in fact, but righteous in hope (Luther, *Commentary on Romans* 4:8).

Luther is not necessarily implying that this co-existence of sin and righteousness is a permanent condition. His point is that God shields our sin through his righteousness. His righteousness is like a protective covering under which we may battle with our sin. But *the existence of sin does not negate our status as Christians*. In justification, we are given the status of righteousness, while we work with God towards attaining the nature of righteousness. In

that God has promised to make us righteous one day, finally eliminating our sin, there is a sense in which we are already righteous in his sight.

This way of thinking is important in a pastoral context. A colleague once described a meeting he had attended at his local church, dealing with the theme of self-esteem. All were asked to rate themselves on a scale between zero (terrible) and ten (perfect). Most of those people rated themselves between four and six (not especially good, but not especially bad either). The visiting speaker (who had been reading some fashionable works of psychotherapy) then declared that they all ought to rate themselves as tens; they were, he said, all perfect and merely suffered from a lack of self-esteem. This provoked an amused reaction among those present, who regarded their self-estimation as accurate and that of their speaker as hopelessly optimistic and deluded.

This incident brings out neatly the reluctance on the part of many modern persons to accept the fact that they are less than perfect. To concede imperfection seems tantamount to a humiliating and degrading admission of total failure. This denial of sin finds its natural expression in the myth of perfection – the unrealistic belief that the way we are is the way we are meant to be. The doctrine of justification invites us to acknowledge our imperfection and sin – while rejoicing in the purpose and power of God to transform the poverty of our nature into the likeness of Jesus Christ.

The story also illustrates how important, helpful and *Christians* Luther's approach to this problem of self-esteem turns out to be. God accepts us as we are. We do not have to rate ourselves at ten to be good Christians. Nor is perfection a prerequisite of acceptance in the sight of God. God accepts us just as we are; he grants us the status of ten on account of his promise to renew and refashion us totally. We score four, five, or six – but we are none the less accepted in his graciousness. We don't have to delude ourselves (or think God is deluded) by pretending we are perfect.

The justification of sinners rests upon no delusions, no legal fictions, and no pretence of holiness. God accepts us for what we are, while he works within us what he wants us to be. We are given the *status* of ten in the light of God's promise to rebuild us and

finally to give us the *nature* of ten. And that gives us encouragement and motivation to move up the scale, receiving his strength and nature in place of our weaknesses and shortcomings. And so, by the grace of God, our fours, fives or sixes become eights, nines or tens. God grants us now a status that reflects his vision, intention and promise concerning what we shall be when recreated by his grace.

But now consider the approach of our amateur psychotherapist. He was telling his hearers that they were perfect. They considered his assessment ludicrous for two reasons. First, it did not accord with their experience. Whatever pretence of perfection they chose to maintain in public, in private they were perfectly aware of their sin. And second, it removed any motivation for self-improvement or growth in holiness. If one scores ten out of ten, there is nothing more to achieve. Luther's approach avoids both these pitfalls. It declares that we *are* sinners (which resonates with our own experience and knowledge of ourselves) and that there is considerable room for improvement. But it also affirms that we have the status of being righteous in the sight of God.

An awareness of sin, then, is not necessarily a symptom of lapse from faith or a sign of imperfect commitment to God. It can be nothing more than a reflection of the continuing struggle against sin, which is an essential component of justification and renewal. Let Luther have the final word on this point:

In ourselves, we are sinners, and yet through faith we are righteous by the imputation of God. For we trust him who promises to deliver us, and in the meantime struggle so that sin may not overwhelm us, but that we may stand up to it until he finally takes it away from us (*Commentary on Romans* 4:7-8).

Earlier we pointed out that self-esteem entails elements of both judgment and emotion. In a similar way, being put in a right relationship with God entails both the objective truth of what Christ has achieved for us on the cross and the subjective experience of entering into a *relationship* with God. In the present chapter, we have been exploring how the cross of Christ establishes

our righteousness in the sight of God. We now consider the way this change in status is experienced in the life of the believer. Earlier the theme of reconciliation was introduced. It is no accident that Jesus chose to illustrate this theme with a story of a wayward son who is restored to his father (Luke 15:11-24):

[The son] got up and went to his father.

But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

The son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son."

But the father said to his servants, "Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found" (Luke 15:20-24).

So what does it mean to experience the fatherhood of God? What are the implications of that experience for self-esteem?

6

The parental care of God

Father God, I wonder how I managed to exist
Without the knowledge of Your parenthood
And Your loving care.

But now I am your son,
I am adopted in Your family
And I can never be alone.

'Cause, Father God, you're there beside me.

Ian Smale

In an earlier chapter, we drew attention to the importance of parental attachment for self-esteem. Positive self-esteem is seen to be linked with attachment to parents or significant others; negative self-esteem appears to be linked with separation from such people. As we have already hinted, the Christian understanding of God's parental care has much to say here. The fatherhood of God, linked with some strongly maternal scriptural images, suggests that Christian self-esteem should be grounded in our attachment to God through Christ.

We could compare this with some secular approaches to self-esteem as follows:

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

How would you describe what "salvation" is and leads to? What are the areas in your own life in which you want "salvation" or "wholeness"?

What does it mean to experience the fatherhood of God? What are the implications of that experience for self esteem?

Are there any parts of the article's thesis that you disagree with?

Which parts of the insights made by the authors are useful for you in relation to God's call?

HOMEWORK

Awareness Examen

The Awareness Examen emerges out of the Ignatian tradition. It invites us to review and examine the day's thoughts, feelings, and actions in terms of how God seemed to be present and how we responded to that presence. It may also be used to review and examine a particular event or experience such as a meeting or gathering to notice more intentionally how God's Spirit was present and active.

1. Select a time and place (usually at the end of the day) that is peaceful and in which you may be alert and prayerfully attentive. Take a few minutes to relax in the presence of God; be aware of God's loving presence in and all around you.
2. Thanks God for everything God has loved into your life since yesterday's examen.
3. Ask God to give you the "heart and mind of Christ", to see reality as Jesus sees it.
4. Reflect prayerfully over your day from the beginning to the present moment. Go through your day with the Lord, checking the "we" (what you and Jesus experienced together) against the "I" (you alone), remembering that "I live not myself alone but Christ lives in me" (Gal 2:19). In reality you live as a "we" not an "I". So as you reflect over today, see everything about which you can say "we", even if you weren't conscious of God's presence at the time. Such as "we ate breakfast, drove to work, we cleaned the house, we spent time with people, we rested, etc." And then see everything about which you cannot say "we" but "I". Such as "I blew up at my parents, I got angry at the slow traffic, I rashly judged someone, I reacted selfishly, etc".

Or ask yourself the following questions:

At what moments did I give and receive the most love today? At what moments did I give and receive the least love today? At what moments did I feel most alive today? At what moments did I feel least alive today? What was today's high point? What was today's low point? When today did I have the greatest sense of belonging to myself, others, God and the universe? When did I have the least sense of belonging? When was I happiest today? When was I saddest?

5. Talk to God about moments where disappointed or offended him. Thank God that he did not walk away or abandon you. Ask him to forgive you for and accept any invitation he gives to repair any damage done and let him redeem your day.
6. Accept an invitation from our Lord to spend some time alone with him tomorrow. Make it a date with definite time and place and length of time.
7. At the end of your prayer, say the Lord's Prayer slowly. Take time to thank God for the gift of this day and God's presence in all that was given.

FOR REFLECTION THIS WEEK

Called Beyond The Comfort Zone

in Prayers for a Privileged People, Walter Brueggemann.

We are among your called.

We have heard and answered your summons.

You have addressed us in the deep places of our lives.

In responsive obedience we testify, as we are able, to your truth as it concerns our common life.

We thank you for the call,

for the burden of that call,

for the risk that goes with it,

for the joy of words given us by your growing spirit, and

for the newness that sometimes comes from your word.

We have indeed been in the counsel of your summoning spirit,

And so we know some truth to speak.

But we are, as well, filled with such imagination of our own,

And our imagination is sometimes matched and overmatched

by our cowardice,

by our readiness to please,

by our quest for well-being.

We are, on most days, a hard mix of true prophet and wayward voice,

a mix of your call to justice and our hope for shalom.

Here we are, as we are, mixed but faithful, compromised but committed, anxious but devoted to you.

Use us and our gifts for your newness that pushes beyond all that we can say or imagine.

We are grateful for words given us; we are more grateful for your word fleshed among us.

NOTES