

Panacea or Placebo? Psychology as Gospel— Self-Esteemism and Its Implications for Christian Counselors and Educators

Rev. Daniel S. Drews

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I KNOW I'M SOMEBODY, 'CUZ GOD DON'T MAKE NO JUNK.

Perhaps more than any other statement, this pithy, eye-catching slogan summarizes “Christian” self-esteem-ism. If it rhymed, one could imagine it dripping eloquently from the loquacious Rev. Jesse Jackson. **I AM SOMEBODY! I AM SOMEBODY!** And since **I AM SOMEBODY**, I don’t have to (do drugs, quit school; join a gang; just fill in the blank with your pet societal problem).

And **I AM SOMEBODY** because **GOD DON'T MAKE JUNK!** You don’t like the way you look? Don’t call what God made junk! Too fat, too pimply, too tall, too short, too uncoordinated, too ugly? God made you that way so that way must be special! “Christian” self-esteemism focuses on the person as worthwhile, meaningful, dignified, simply because he/she is a human being, created in the image of God. If you just remember that you are a special creation of God, you will be able to resist those things God doesn’t care for.

There seems to be a certain Scriptural basis for all this. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus comforted His disciples,

“So do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink: or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. *Are you not much more valuable than they?*” (Matthew 6:25-26)

But far from being a Gospel statement establishing identity and worth, this passage stands as a rebuke of unbelief and a lack of trust. It is not a springboard for victory over vice, but a reminder that our daily bread comes from above.

Close examination ought also to reveal that the claim “**GOD DON'T MAKE JUNK**” is a thinly veiled denial of original sin. How can you say that humans are sinful from conception, goes the argument, **when GOD DON'T MAKE JUNK?** As this essay continues, it will, God willing, also be clear that the best-known proponents of self-esteemism, e.g. Dr. James Dobson, Dr. Robert Schuller, etc., hold terribly unscriptural views about sin and man’s natural lack of ability to overcome it. And too many “Why?’s” appear as challenges to God and His infinite wisdom. Why, for instance, did God destroy so many dignified and worthwhile creatures in (the Flood, Sodom and Gomorrah, etc.; fill in the blank with your favorite story of fire and brimstone)? Why would a God who loves all His creatures send someone to hell just because they didn’t hear the Gospel? What the challenger ultimately is left with is either a Marcionite/gnostic view of the deity, a higher-critical erasure of law and judgment passages in Scripture, and ultimately Christ-denying universalism or grace-denying Arminianism.

The title of this essay, “*Panacea or Placebo: Psychology as Gospel—Self-esteemism and its implications for Christian counselors and educators,*” hints at your essayist’s considered outlook on the veritable barrage of such pseudoevangelical materials that sing a siren’s song to our members. This essay will not argue against whether or not the term “self-esteem” is in and of itself neutral. Rev. Rolfe Westendorfe of Siloah Ev. Luth. Church in Milwaukee, WI, begins his article entitled “Self-Esteem of the Third Kind” in the March 15, 1988 *Northwestern Lutheran* by suggesting that “self-esteem” sometimes means sinful pride: that’s bad. Sometimes it means “grace received;” then it’s good. “Self-esteem” is, commonly defined, how a person looks at himself. Thus, goes the thinking, discussion of the validity of the term “self-esteem” is moot, because we all have a view of ourselves. We just have to make sure we instill the right *kind* of self-image.

What follows, however, is an attempt to demonstrate that “self-esteem” dare not be considered a neutral term on today’s theological scene any more than ought the formerly useful adjective “gay.” “Self-esteem” ought to be a red flag that what we are reading is psychology substituted for the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In the place of sin we have low self-esteem. Instead of guilt caused by sin we have low self-esteem attributable to poor (parents, teachers, etc; fill in the blank with your favorite scapegoat). Instead of Gospel comfort is self-pride. Instead of repentance wrought by the Holy Ghost through the means of grace is self-help. Instead of Gospel-motivated lives of thanks is self-centered, “I want to (get more active in church, get in shape. etc; fill in the blank with your favorite good work) to feel better about myself.”

This poses dire implications for Christian pastors, of whom increasing amounts of time are demanded for counseling, and whose members clamor more vocally not for classes in Scripture or in doctrine, but in “practical” things like family living. Shelves of Christian booksellers are filled to the brim with self-help books and how-to guides and parenting manuals that, to a number, reflect this “psychology as Gospel” spirit. But far from being a golden panacea or cure-all, self-esteemism is nothing more than a pyrite-colored placebo which may fool people into thinking they are healed, but does not offer the cure for our spiritual disease found only in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. For the protection of our own souls, and consequently the souls entrusted to our care by the divine call, we must circumspectly and specifically warn against this “other gospel” that ears itch for. The chief reasons can be epitomized thusly:

1. Self-esteemism (Humanistic psychology often dressed up in Christian jargon) categorically misses the mark in diagnosis.
2. Because self-esteemism’s diagnosis is unscriptural. So is its prescription.

What does the Bible say?

God’s word provides the accurate assessment of our natural human condition since the fall of Adam into sin. “For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander,” Jesus said (Matthew 15:19). The inspired apostle Paul’s description of human nature is even bleaker: “The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery, idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like (Galatians 5:19-21).” By nature we humans are, from God’s viewpoint, blind, dead, and his enemies: “As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins... (Eph. 2:1);” “The sinful mind is hostile to God. it does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God (Rom. 8:8).” Man is sinful by nature, not merely by nurture. Sin is part of our heredity, traceable to our first sinful parents. And this “original sin” (SIN) displays evidence of its existence in all manner of “actual sins” (sins). All problems peculiar to life this side of eternity stem from this sinful human nature. And what effect does this sinful cause produce in man?

“Through the law we become conscious of sin (Rom. 3:20).” Whether that divine law is the verbalized moral code of the decalogue or the natural law, written in the heart and testified to by the conscience, man becomes aware that he has missed the mark of God’s standard of perfection. Or, to state it another way, sinful man experiences the horrible feeling of guilt. This guilt may cause excessive consternation and, yes, psychological turmoil. Consider David, guilty of the gross sins of adultery, murder, and deception, who confessed, “I am worn out from groaning; all I night long I flood my bed with weeping and drench my couch with tears (Psalm 6:6);” and “When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer (Psalm 32:3-4).” Or consider Job, yes, patient and righteous Job, who in his physical agony had dared to accuse God of capriciously toying with his life, but after a sound rebuke of his haughty self-righteousness confessed, “Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know ... Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes (Job 42:3,6).” Or what of Peter, who wept bitterly in his shame over denying Christ? Might we fairly include in this discussion also the examples of the Prodigal Son, who confessed, “Father, I am

not worthy to be called your son,” or the publican, who hung his head, beat his breast, and said, “God be merciful to me, a sinner (Luke 18:13)””? It ought to be clear that although man has devised numerous ways of dealing with sin-produced guilt there is only one way commended by God’s word. Adam and Eve may have tried to hide from God and then shift the blame on each other and the serpent; David may have attempted a coverup; the Pharisees and others may have, like the whitewashed tombs Jesus labelled them, denied their innate wickedness through lives of legalistic traditionalism; even stubborn obstinacy and wanton rebelliousness abound, bringing down from heaven God’s righteous judgment (Romans 1:18-32).

But for the humble penitent, God has a different message. John writes, “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness (1 Jn. 1:8-9).” David sang, “Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the LORD’—and you forgave the guilt of my sin (Psalm 32:5).” Jesus invites, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest (Matt. 11:28).” That rest is none other than the Gospel’s melodious and soothing message, “Your sins are forgiven.” Because Jesus lived the perfect life demanded by God’s law as the substitute for sinful man, and because Jesus’ sacrificial death satisfied divine justice’s demand that every sin be punished, God has declared the world to be reconciled to Him, to be NOT GUILTY. Here is the one and only answer to sin-produced guilt. It is the message of justification by grace through faith. It is Christ Jesus, and him crucified!

This message of the saving gospel not only provides comfort, it produces change. The God-given faith which clings to Jesus Christ alone for forgiveness, life, and salvation manifests its vitality by doing good works. Out of love and thanks to his Savior, the believer strives to do what pleases God and avoid what displeases Him. There is no such thing as a “faith” which could not produce this fruit. And the only type of good work which is truly pleasing to God is that which comes from faith (Heb. 11:6, Rom. 14:23). This fruit, too, is the work of the Holy Spirit, the sanctifier. The Holy Spirit does not choose to come to man via any other means than the Gospel. Therefore, in order to bring about good works which please God, it is absolutely necessary to proclaim and properly apply the gospel. For although the Law of God can make a person obey outwardly by telling him what he must or should or ought to do, and although the heart of man is fairly adept at selecting behavior which suits its self-interests, only the gospel can cause a person to want to please God.

And what an attitude alteration the Holy Spirit effects through the Gospel, including the attitude over against “SELF!”

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Jesus Christ have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying one another. (Galatians 5:22-26)”

Along with the fruit of the Spirit called “self-control” come it self-discipline” and “self-denial.” “For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love, and of self-discipline. (2 Timothy 1:7)” And Jesus, in a verse recorded by all three of the synoptic gospels, told His would-be followers, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me (Matthew 16:24).” Selfishness (Gal. 5:20, James 3:14-16), self-seeking (Ro. 2:8, 1 Cor. 13:5), and self-indulgence (Mt. 23:25, James 5:5) are evils Scripture condemns. Indeed, St. Paul joyfully encouraged the Philippians to be imitators of their Savior in this way:

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should not look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus (Phil. 2:3-4).

Had Jesus looked to his own interests, he would have grasped at equality with God and would not have humbled himself, becoming obedient to the point of death on the cross. Such self-sacrifice prompts our feeble (in comparison) imitations.

Finally, besides the fruit which the Holy Spirit produces in every believer's heart and life, there are various and diverse gifts of the Spirit. In the body of Christ are people with different gifts (Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12) who work together for the common good, as the individual members of a human body function differently yet as a unit. The gifts God has bestowed upon us as individuals are different in quality (service, administration, etc.) and also in quantity (cf. the parable of the stewards, Matthew 25). Moved by the Spirit through the Gospel, believers supplant sinful attitudes of jealousy, envy, ridicule, self-pity, and pride with God-pleasing ones of appreciation, gratitude, supportiveness and faithfulness. The gifts and talents of others are for a believer an occasion of thanksgiving to God for His blessing. He also strives to be a faithful steward of the gifts and talents with which he himself has been blessed, not whining nor complaining about what he lacks, but glorifying God through faithful stewardship of what he possesses by grace.

Well might we use the words of Romans 3 to summarize: "Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. On what principle! On that of observing the law? Not but on that of faith." The gospel excludes all boasting—in one's own efforts to achieve salvation, in one's piety, in one's abilities or accomplishments. A truly Christian attitude is not "self-esteem," but "glory to God in the highest!"

Self-esteemism's unscriptural diagnosis and prescription

There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God—having a form of godliness but denying its power. They are the kind who worm their way into homes and gain control over weak-willed women, who are loaded down with sins are swayed by all kinds of evil desires, always learning but never able to acknowledge the truth. Just as Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so also these men oppose the truth—men of depraved minds, who, as far as the faith is concerned, is rejected. But they will not get very far because, as in the case of those men, their folly will be clear to everyone. (2 Timothy 3:1-9)

Humanistic psychology is obstinate in its refusal to acknowledge the innate sinfulness of mankind. Therefore, it ought not surprise us when common sins such as alcohol/substance abuse, spousal or child abuse, crime, violence, teenage pregnancy, etc. are declared to stem from "low self-esteem." The state of California created a task force to "Promote Self-Esteem and Personal and Social Responsibility" in order to link all of society's ills to the great evil of low self-esteem. The September 20, 1992 Fond du Lac Reporter included the article "Abusive men often lack esteem," which began: "Why do some men abuse? Low self-esteem is common among abusers, Howard, a FAVR volunteer and leader for the FAVR Men's Group, said." And in *Dr. Dobson Answers Your Questions*, he asserts:

The health of an entire society depends on the ease with which its individual members can gain personal acceptance. Thus, whenever the keys to self-esteem are seemingly out of reach for a large percentage of the people, as in twentieth-century America, then widespread mental illness, neuroticism, hatred, alcoholism, drug abuse, violence, and social disorder will certainly occur. (p. 295)

The DARE programs in many American cities assume this to be true, and attempt to impart to children the ability to resist drugs and alcohol by increasing their self-esteem. One must wonder, however, how deep-seated a problem this is in American society. *Newsweek* magazine, in a February 17, 1992 cover story, reported that

American schoolchildren rank far ahead of students in Japan, Taiwan, and China in self-confidence about their abilities in math. Unfortunately, this achievement was marred by the fact that Americans

were far behind in *actual performance* (italics theirs) in math...The difference between the cultures is that the Japanese are trying to be proud, and we're trying to be happy (p. 48).

The same article noted that the scientific papers brought forward as supposed support for the California task force on Self-Esteem concluded that

“there is a paucity of good research... there is insufficient evidence to support the belief in a direct relations between self-esteem and child abuse.. self-esteem may be positively *or* negatively correlated with aggression... two studies linked *high* self-esteem with increased sexual activity by teens (p. 51).”

One can conclude that psychology's answer to “the problem of evil” is far from scientifically proven. But, like evolution, another far-fetched theory that passes itself off as science, it's the most “plausible explanation” when God and His Word are categorically rejected.

What are the causes of low self-esteem? Dr. Dobson says that inferior physical beauty and inferior intelligence are the two main culprits. If I'm not as pretty or smart as someone else. I'll feel terrible about myself. But there are other convenient scapegoats, given several sessions on the therapist's couch. Parents, teachers, coworkers, abusive boyfriends, spouses, schoolmates, strangers, the uncaring 12 years of Reagan and Bush, poverty, the economy, unemployment, the boss, the neighbors, Uncle Frank, Vietnam, repressed homosexuality, traditional religion and its emphasis on sin, rude salespeople, white people, western civilization, police, and a host of other evildoers are responsible, by their mistreatment of me, for my low self-esteem and therefore for my abuse of alcohol or some other problem. Personal responsibility and accountability are non-existent in the mindset of victimhood.

What becomes the solution to all of these problems? Increase self-esteem, by any means possible, and you have given people the power to overcome evil in their lives. Robert Schuller, noted televangelist and pastor of the California megachurch The Crystal Cathedral, states it this way in *Self-Esteem: The New Reformation*:

If only we could love ourselves enough to dare to approach God, what constructive dreams he would give us! What noble possibilities God wants to reveal to us—possibilities that would offer stimulation plus real security in service. But we feel too unworthy. (p. 66)

Man's “original sin” is a lack of self-confidence and self-love, according to the theology of possibility thinking. Therefore, before a person can love God or love his neighbor, he must first love himself (“Love your neighbor as yourself” allegedly means that Jesus commanded us to love ourselves first). Dr. Dobson echoes this sentiment when he writes:

Jesus commanded us to love our neighbors as ourselves, implying not only that we are permitted a reasonable expression of self-love, but that love for others is impossible—until we experience a measure of self-respect (James Dobson, *Dr. Dobson Answers Your Questions*, p. 306).

What Schuller and Dobson, among a host of others, declare is the source of human dignity, worth, and self-esteem, is simply the fact of being human. Jesus became a human, so all humanity is valuable as a result. God created you in his image, therefore you are special to him. Other people are valuable and deserving of respect simply because God made them. Where original sin and objective justification are rejected, such thinking pervades.

If a person wants to raise their self-esteem or that of their children, manifold resources are available. Dr. Dobson's books have been often cited, here is his advice:

One of the most productive means of instilling self-confidence is to teach methods by which the child can compensate. Compensation occurs when the individual counterbalances his weaknesses by capitalizing on his strengths. It is our job as parents to help our children find those strengths and learn to exploit them for all the self-satisfaction they will yield ... The unconscious reasoning of a compensater (sic) goes like this: "I refuse to be drowned in a sea of inferiority. I can achieve adequacy through success if I work hard at it. Therefore I will pour all my energy into basketball (or painting, or sewing, or politics, or graduate school, or gardening, or motherhood, or salesmanship, or Wall Street, or piano playing, or baton-twirling, or football) (Dobson, *Dr. Dobson Answers Your Questions*, pp. 173-174.)."

The idea of working hard at developing those areas in which you have gifts does not sound like a bad idea. However, the motivation ("exploit for self-satisfaction ... achieve adequacy through success") is a far cry from faithful Christian stewardship.

What else is available to the Christian consumer of a reputedly "Christian" nature? This essayist obtained copies of *52 Ways to Built Your Child's Self-Esteem and Confidence* and *52 Ways to Build Your Self-Esteem and Confidence* from a local Christian bookseller. Incidentally, the salesperson highly recommended them as excellent resources for parenting and coping skills. Eagerly I flipped through the pages to such common-sense and practical suggestions as "Give your child swimming lessons" and "Teach your child basic first-aid skills" and "Teach your child basic cooking skills." These are practical suggestions and useful things to learn, and many will either learn them at home or in Lutheran Pioneers. But in this volume could be found no mention of Jesus Christ. A couple of chapters were spiced with God-talk, such as in the suggestion to pray for your child when he can hear you saying "Dear God, thank you for giving me such a wonderful child as Junior, help him to know how special he is." The volume for adults was similar, if not worse. For 132 pages God did not merit a mention. Then, in chapter 52, "Ask God's Help," we are told, "Turn to your Creator for a sense of your identity ... Rely on the Divine Helper (C.E. Rollins, *52 Ways to Build Your Self-Esteem and Confidence*, p. 133)." Hundreds of pages can be read in Dobson books without discovering any mention of Jesus Christ—and when his name is invoked, it is usually as a moral teacher or precept-prescriber, an example-setter or a buddy to pray to for help in trouble, and not as redeemer. One receives the distinct impression that an underlying but nonverbalized attitude in all this might be expressed as "Who needs salvation from sin as a solution when the basic problem is low self-esteem—and there are so many ways to build that up without having to drag God into it? Who needs the Gospel to overcome sin when cultural pride and revised history will do the trick? Who needs to preach the 'Christ For Us' when I'm really motivated by my identity as a created child of God?" As Paul wrote Timothy, these lovers of the self have a form of godliness but deny the only power that can effect the real article.

And yet, these Reformed "How-to books" present to us as pastors, educators, and parents a great challenge—the challenge to be practical. Our pragmatic society and pragmatic congregational members want to be taught what works; they want to know what steps they can take to get the results they want. They want good marriages. They want good kids. They want good jobs. And surely Satan rejoices when he can succeed in making our people think that the word of God is patently ineffective in these important areas compared to the practical advice found in the books of the psychologists and moralizers.

But nothing is as truly practical and beneficial for the soul as Law and Gospel, properly distinguished and correctly applied. This is what Pastor Thomas Franzmann also concluded in his January 1, 1988 article in the *Northwestern Lutheran* entitled "Self-Esteem: Solution to All Problems?":

Evangelical Lutherans have always believed that "feeling good about oneself" is a state of mind that follows a proper application of law and gospel. The law of God reveals our sins, wounds our consciences, crushes us and makes us feel helpless before the Almighty. The law makes the sinner feel like a worm. But the gospel's message of love and forgiveness in Christ Jesus heals the wounds, restores the soul and instills new life and hope in the believer. The gospel makes us feel new and alive, ready to

face the world as soldiers in the army of the living God. Rejoicing in our status as children of God, we approach our responsibilities in church and society with a song and a smile, doing our level best to carry them out in a way that pleases our Lord and Savior. There is no substitute for that. Attempts to solve the problems that beset society by means of a solution that does not include Christ will come up short (p.11).

The problem is that the sinful nature would rather hear about “low self-esteem” than sin; and the accompanying *opinio legis* will love turning to self-help books for solutions rather than God’s grace. In their treatise on this subject, *Psychoheresy: The Psychological Seduction of Christianity*, Martin and Deidre Bobgan put it this way:

Low self esteem is popular because it’s much easier to accept the idea of having “low self-esteem” than confessing evil, ungodly, self-centered thoughts and then repenting through believing what God has said in His Word. Low self-esteem calls for psychological treatment to raise the self-esteem. Sinful thinking calls for confession, repentance, restoration, and walking by faith in a love relationship with God provided by the cross of Christ. We would suggest that one look to Scripture to discover one’s greatest need and to find an antidote to life’s problems, rather than attempt to scripturalize some psychological fad. Mankind’s greatest need is for Jesus Christ, not self-esteem (Bobgan, *Psychoheresy*, pp. 58-59).”

But don’t expect confession of sins to find its way into the liturgy at the Crystal Cathedral any time soon; not when Dr. Schuller says that the basic flaw of modern Christianity is

The failure to proclaim the gospel in a way that can satisfy every person’s deepest need—one’s spiritual hunger for glory. Rather than glorify God’s highest creation—the human being—Christian liturgies, hymns, prayers, and scriptural interpretations have often insensitively and destructively offended the dignity of the person (Schuller, *op. cit.*, p. 31.).

Confession of sins is treated as contributing to low self-esteem and robbing God’s creature of personal dignity.

How can we as pastors, teachers, and parents meet the challenge of the self-esteem movement? Our new worship book, *Christian-Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal* will include a short order for private confession. To bring private confession back into the lives of our congregations will be a tall order; but the personal application of law and gospel such a pastoral practice will afford can present tremendous occasion for true spiritual growth. Our Lutheran confessions speak highly of the practice of private confession and personal absolution; what they condemned was the Roman sacrament of Penance with its requirements for satisfaction for sin to be made by the individual. Luther himself stated that he would have given up anything rather than to be deprived of the privilege of hearing the personal reassurance of forgiveness of sins in the confessional.

Personal communion announcements could provide such an opportunity for private confession, as could many counseling sessions. Counseling tools which seek to correct peoples’ problems without addressing the problem of sin should be discarded, no matter how “practical” they seem. Above all, let us see our roles as preachers of repentance, using each opportunity as God’s heralds to expose and condemn sin. This will not mean gutlessly ranting about how wicked the world is, for all that will do is create Pharisees. Use the Law properly to prepare the heart for the Gospel. Invite and comfort with the reassurance of forgiveness of all sins; motivate to a new life with Jesus on the basis of what he has done for us. Let’s keep on getting to know our people and their problems, yes, even their sins, so that our preaching may be direct and appropriable, that when people leave, they say “That sermon was meant just for me.” Nothing, repeat, nothing is more useful, practical, or beneficial than Law and Gospel, properly distinguished and personally and properly applied.

As educators, we will want to be cautious of using secular materials that wallow in laudation and congratulation without reason. We cannot bestow an unearned grade for no work because we’re afraid to hurt the self-esteem. Instead, we teach the faithful use of God’s gifts as His stewards—and the law as mirror

occasionally needs to be called into use here, too. Have we ever confirmed a student who wouldn't learn the memory work and couldn't pass any of the tests, then consoled ourselves by saying, "Well, I know he has faith, and I wouldn't want to play God and pass judgment on his faith by not confirming him." Well, our newly baptized infants have faith too, and they are not invited to receive the Lord's supper. Communicant membership is for those who agree in all of the doctrines of Holy Scripture. We cannot allow concern for a 14-year-old's "self-esteem" cause us to lord it over the Lord's Supper.

As parents, we need to help our children be faithful stewards of God's blessings. If our kid is an out-of-shape couch potato, don't say, "God don't make no junk, and you're wonderful just how you are!" Get him or her away from the electronic babysitter and the bag of chips to do something physical-motivated by the fact that "You were bought with a price; therefore honor God with your body." If our kid is not performing well in school, maybe it's time we stopped the excuses ("Nintendo is great for hand-eye coordination") and made him hit the books! How much/little do students study? I actually had Latin students want to impress me by saying, "I hope I do well on the semester exam—I studied for TWO WHOLE HOURS!" So we need to help them get away from the "Teacher doesn't like me" excuse or the "God didn't make me smart enough" excuse to a concerted effort to be faithful with all of God's gifts, including the productive use of his gift of time. And, like the servant in Jesus' parable who said, "We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty (Luke 17:10)," we want them to know that faithful stewardship is our response to the love of God, and not something done because we want his resultant blessings. And if our child is down, depressed, and guilty, we need to speak openly about God and his love for us in Christ.

Simplistic answers to complex problems? Not really. St. Paul perhaps stated it best when he wrote to the Ephesians,

Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind and teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into Him who is the Head, that is, Christ. (4:14-15)

Humanistic psychology and its message of self-esteem, even when given a Christian baptism, are winds and waves that toss infants in faith to and fro. They strive to make man feel good and OK even when he isn't. They attempt to resolve guilt by finding any scapegoat other than the one God provided on Calvary. But preaching Law and Gospel for Repentance, life, and salvation, is indeed speaking the truth in love, even when the truth is ugly or hurts. And in this way only will we, our hearers, our students and our children grow up into Him who is the Head, that is, Christ.

SOLI DEO GLORIA

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