

## **An Analysis of an Alternative to the Self-Esteem Movement**

*The Danger of Self-Love* analyzes the self-esteem movement that came to prominence in American secular society in the 1960s and 1970s and was adopted enthusiastically by evangelicals a decade later. It continues to exercise its influence today. Currently it does not receive the same attention as it previously enjoyed in secular and evangelical society, only because it has been embraced as an established truth.

The theory asserts that self-esteem, a good self-image, provides the necessary foundation for a wholesome personality and successful behavior. Therefore, it argues that a person must have high self-esteem before he achieves psychological wellness and success. Consequently, it claims that lack of self-esteem is the cause of virtually every human problem and enhancing one's self-esteem provides the solution. Therefore, the advocates of this theory assert that individuals must experience self-esteem unconditionally, apart from performance, since good behavior and success results from self-esteem

The secular theory claims that it is supported by psychological research and the evangelical version asserts that it has support from Scripture. However, further examination has demonstrated that neither of these sources provide support for this theory.

The latest psychological research shows that self-esteem does not promote psychological wellness and achievement but instead can result in persons becoming defensive and even violent when their self-esteem is challenged. Carol Dweck, a noted psychologist speaking to a group at Google was asked regarding the impact of this self-esteem theory. She responded that, "...it was a complete disaster. It led to the acceptance of mediocrity, it didn't challenge people to fulfill their potential..." She then went on to describe other negative effects.<sup>i</sup>

A careful examination of Scripture exposes the invalidity of the evangelical version. A major claim has been that since we are called to love a neighbor as ourselves, we must

love ourselves first. *The Danger of Self-Love* exposes the unbiblical nature of this and other arguments from Scripture.

Nonetheless, belief in the benefits of self-esteem has become so deeply embedded as part of contemporary American secular and evangelical culture that John Leo reports:

The self-esteem movement is one of the marvels of our time. It goes on and on, even though its assumptions are wrong and its basic premises have been discredited by a great deal of research. Like a monster in the last 10 minutes of a horror movie, it has enough fatal wounds to stop a platoon. But it keeps stumbling on, seeming not to notice.<sup>ii</sup>

Because of the continued influence of the theory of self-esteem and the damage that it inflicts, evangelicals especially need to be exposed to the information contained in *The Danger of Self-Love* in order to identify its teachings and protect against their negative impact.

Even more significant, this book describes the biblical alternative to self-esteem, which is not a poor self-image. Spiritual and psychological health requires that we not only reject this error but also adopt the biblical alternative. The solution comprises the central component for Christian living. I would encourage you to read the book to discover what it is.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-71zdXCMU6A&t=60s>

<sup>ii</sup> John Leo, "Damn, I'm Good!" *U.S. News & World Report*, 18 May, 1998, p. 21.