

SELF-INTERPRETATION

By Paul Penno Jr.

June 15, 2013

Psalm 139:17, 18¹

His name was Fleming, and he was a poor Scottish farmer. One day, while trying to make a living for his family, he heard a cry for help coming from a nearby bog. He dropped his tools and ran to the bog.

There, mired to his waist in black muck, was a terrified boy, screaming and struggling to free himself. Farmer Fleming saved the lad from what could have been a slow and terrifying death.

The next day, a fancy carriage pulled up to the Scotsman's sparse surroundings. An elegantly dressed nobleman stepped out and introduced himself as the father of the boy Farmer Fleming had saved.

"I want to repay you," said the nobleman. "You saved my son's life."

"No, I can't accept payment for what I did," the Scottish farmer replied waving off the offer. At that moment, the farmer's own son came to the door of the family hovel.

"Is that your son?" the nobleman asked.

"Yes," the farmer replied proudly.

"I'll make you a deal. Let me provide him with the level of education my own son will enjoy. If the lad is anything like his father, he'll no doubt grow to be a man we both will be proud of." And that he did.

Farmer Fleming's son attended the very best schools and in time, graduated from St. Mary's Hospital Medical School in London, and went on to become known throughout the world as the noted Sir Alexander Fleming, the discoverer of Penicillin.

Years afterward, the same nobleman's son who was saved from the bog was stricken with pneumonia. What saved his life this time? Penicillin.

The name of the nobleman? Lord Randolph Churchill. His son's name? Sir Winston Churchill.

"Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves" (Phil. 2:3).

A growing deception found in Christian counseling (and throughout society) is the false gospel of "self-esteem" which is incompatible with the Biblical Gospel of the Cross of Jesus Christ.

Increasingly, the counseling mentality is that "low self-esteem" is the root cause of a teenager deciding to engage in pre-marital sex or of a housewife who is always depressed. In fact, prominent Christian personalities can be heard to claim that society's greatest problem is that of "low self-esteem", and that everything from abortion, school dropouts, teen pregnancy to rape, robbery, and poverty can be solved if only we help people to esteem themselves more highly; to love themselves more and more; and to realize their great self-worth!

Robert Schuller of the Crystal Cathedral has been proclaiming the gospel of *Self-Esteem: The New Reformation* (Word: 1982) for well over forty years. He sets man rather than God in the forefront. He ascribes man's resistance to grace to a lost sense

¹ How Great Thou Art; At the Cross.

of self-worth, and thinks we should tell sinners that they are worthy rather than unworthy.

James Dobson has built a whole industry of Christian counseling on self-esteem. The theme of his book, *Hide or Seek: How to Build Self-esteem in Your Child* is increasing self-esteem. He says:

“It has been my purpose to formulate a well-defined philosophy—an approach to child-rearing—which will contribute to self-esteem from infancy onward.”

The self-esteem gospel which has been so popular throughout the latter part of the 20th century and the first part of this century, has been a subtle deception of Satan. He has perfected the art of sophistry in convincing Christians that before they can love others they must first love themselves. This is a subtle twist of the words found in the great commandment: “Love thy neighbor as thyself.”

If Satan can get Christians to think that self-love, self-esteem is an essential part of the gospel, then he has defeated the principle of the cross. The cross is the revelation to our dull senses that God is self-denying. Satan has perpetually accused God of self-exaltation—that He asks of us more than He requires of Himself. “His death answered the question as to whether there was self-denial with the Father and the Son.”² The cross has forever settled the issue of God’s self-denying love.

Now that issue plays out in the final crisis which is just upon us. If Satan can get us to buy into the self-esteem movement, then he knows that we will cave

² Ellen G. White, “The Plan of Salvation,” *Signs of the Times* (Feb. 20, 1893).

in over the “mark of the beast.” “It is self-esteem that stands between the human agent and his God.”³ The love of self will be the prime value, over loving God and neighbor in the great controversy.

The true Holy Spirit teaches “the soul” to “hate its selfishness, abhor its *self-love*, and will seek, through Christ’s righteousness, for the purity of heart that is in harmony with the law of God and the character of Christ” (SC 29). The whole self-esteem movement which has taken root in the evangelical church is based on the teaching that self-love is desirable. It encourages flattery and self-affirmation. It is the false holy spirit which caused Lucifer to love himself and assert his independence from God in heaven. All self-love movements must inevitably result in the overthrow and murder of the Son of God. Says a wise writer, “Love is a precious gift which we receive from Jesus.” Love is not self-love—that’s its counterfeit, the perversion of all that’s beautiful and noble. Self-love is the pure evil of Spiritualism, learned from the fallen Lucifer.

The true Holy Spirit teaches “lowliness of mind” to “esteem others better than themselves” (Phil. 2:3), imparts true self-respect “in Christ,” glories in the cross. Realizing that the price paid for each soul on the cross was equivalent to the life of the Son of God creates a genuine healthy self-respect. Christ paid the price of His life directly to you. “Ye are bought with a price.”

The false holy spirit abhors Paul’s counsel; encourages self-centered self-esteem; glories in

³ *Our High Calling*, p. 114.

self-assertion; creates religious arrogance. Christ's condescension is virtually ignored.

The true holy spirit discloses how "enmity against God has deviled every act of life" (SC 28, 29). The bad feeling; yes, downright hatred directed toward God fills every sinner's heart unbeknownst to him. That is why it is so basic to understand that we are each responsible for the murder of the Son of God. It was our sin that put him on the cross.

On the other hand, the false holy spirit assures the sinner that self-denial is the root of his problems. He does not need to go around feeling bad about himself. "I'm Ok and you're OK." There is a disconnect between the Christian profession of believing in the cross and living by its principle of self-denial. Just wear the cross as an ornament. Put it up on the wall of your house. Have a little shrine with candles around it. The phone is off the hook from heaven to the private soul in getting through the message of daily living identification with the crucifixion of Christ.

In fact, the self-esteem gospel is one of the evidences that "Babylon is fallen, is fallen." There has been no restoration of true *agape* in popular Christianity. There is a woeful misperception of the cross of Christ. This popular trend has leeches into our circles to the extent that we have bought into the self-esteem movement.

We are natural-born self-lovers. It is a contradiction of terms to say that innately we are capable of loving others as ourselves. A self-centered person is incapable of loving others as he loves himself. So the only way that this

commandment can be understood properly is through the prism of God's *agape*. God's love is self-giving. It led Christ to self-denial. It led Him to the point of giving His life for His enemies. It was Jesus who spoke the words "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" (Matt. 19:19). It was God who filled those words with their proper meaning: "He that spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all" (Rom. 8:32).

God gives you a proper estimate of yourself. Is Jesus teaching what the popular self-esteem movement in the churches advocate? Must you love yourself first before you can love your neighbor?

Jesus addressed this matter with the rich young ruler who asked an old covenant question: "What good thing shall I *do*, that I may have eternal life?" (Matt. 19:16). The Lord said, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" (Matt. 19:19). Upon closer self-investigation the youth was satisfied that he had fulfilled all the commandments. But something unidentifiable left him unsettled: "What lack I yet?" (Matt. 19:20).

When Jesus bid him sell all he had and give it to the poor, He invited the young man to follow Him in the pathway of self-denial—the way of the cross (Matt. 19:21). The "young man" "went away sorrowful" because of his "great possessions" (vs. 22). His idol was himself that wealth secured. He hadn't really kept any of the commandments because he was motivated by selfishness.⁴

⁴ "The lover of self is a transgressor of the law. . . . "The young man" had "selfishness of his heart. . . . He did not

Whatever Jesus is teaching by the words “love thy neighbor as thyself,” He is not teaching you must love yourself first before you can love your neighbor. Self-love is the basis for the self-esteem movement. Self-love was invented by Lucifer and was the original sin that motivated him to rebel against God and murder the Son of God.

If one wants to talk about loving oneself before he can love his neighbor in the context of self-giving *agape*, then it means to prefer harm to oneself over harm to another. It means the pouring out of one’s own life, in order to preserve the life of another, even his enemy. It means evaluating the life of another as more valuable than his own life. Jesus did not value Himself more than He valued you. He gave up all His riches and became poor that you might become rich. It is only as one is truly dead to all “self” that others are valued in the light of the Infinite life which was given for them.

There is a world of difference between self-respect and self-esteem. One is a healthy, God-given, sanctified consciousness of common sense, and the other is a sinful sense of self-importance and pride. One is that blessed fruit of “grace” that teaches one “not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith” (Rom. 12:3, KJV). Another version: “Be modest in your thinking, and judge yourself according to the amount of faith that God

possess true love for God or man. . . . In his love of self . . . he was out of harmony with the principles of heaven.” Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons*, p. 392.

has given you” (TEV). Another: “It’s important that you not misinterpret yourselves” (Peterson).

This text indicates that the greater a person’s faith is, the less will he think of himself. As the apostle expresses it, he will “think soberly.” Faith is a heart appreciation for what it cost the Son of God to die in our place. Faith is the response of a heart that has been reconciled to God by His love. “Many see much to admire in the life of Christ. But true love for Him can never dwell in the heart of the self-righteous. Not to see our own deformity is not to see the beauty of Christ’s character. When we are fully awake to our own sinfulness, we shall appreciate Christ. The more humble are our views of ourselves, the more clearly we shall see the spotless character of Jesus. . . . Not to see the marked contrast between Christ and ourselves is not to know ourselves. He who does not abhor himself cannot understand the meaning of redemption. . . . There are many who do not see themselves in the light of the law of God. They do not loathe selfishness; therefore they are selfish.”⁵ Such a heart has been changed from self-centeredness to being motivated by God’s love.

Pride is intoxicating. Just as alcohol stimulates a man without building him up, and finally deprives him of reason, so a man, to use a common expression, “loses his head” when he gets to hunting for the good traits in his character. Pride, like alcohol, furnishes no nourishment with which to build the man up. If a man is to grow strong, he

⁵ Ellen G. White, “Self-exaltation,” *The Present Truth* 20, 36 (September 8, 1904), pp. 562-563.

must receive nourishment from a source outside of himself; but the vain person lives upon himself, and so becomes poorer by what he feeds upon. And as alcohol causes a man to stumble in his walk, and finally brings him to ruin, so “pride goeth before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall” (Prov. 16:18).

For years Sally had been involved in psychotherapy. For six months she had been an outpatient at a local mental hospital. From her perspective, her father had never affirmed her. While her brothers were continually built up and commended, she was always told, “You can never do anything right. You will never amount to anything.” After pouring out the sad story of her difficult childhood, she began to cry.

“Sometimes I feel like I can’t do anything right,” she sobbed. “I feel like I am completely worthless.”

After a few moments of silence, her friend responded very slowly and softly, “Maybe you are completely worthless.”

She was startled. She looked up with anger in her eyes and said, “No one ever told me that before! My psychiatrist always tells me that I am a valuable person, that I should develop a good self-image, that I . . .”

“Has it worked?” asked her friend.

“Well, no,” she admitted, “but I am not ready to give up on myself. I am a valuable human being.”

Evidently, God wants us to “interpret” ourselves, but to do it “soberly,” with reasonable common sense, anticipating the final judgment when each “must . . . appear before the judgment seat of Christ

. . . [to] receive . . . according to that he has done, whether good or bad” (2 Cor. 5:10). The self-esteem approach leaves one liable to a rude shock before that “judgment seat,” hearing the dear Lord say, “Depart from Me” when the self-esteemers will arrogantly remonstrate with Him (Matt. 25:41-45). Of their glittering careers when they were sure that they had “prophesied in [His] name . . . and done many wonderful works” and heard “all men . . . speak well” of them (Luke 6:26) the Lord will be forced to say, “I never knew you” (cf. Matt. 7:21-23). Sadly, it was somebody else apparently blessing you!

It sounds corny, but it’s biblical: when you seek to “interpret” yourself rightly, look around and thank the Lord that “a living dog is better than a dead lion.” When you’re invited to a banquet, “do not sit down in the best place, lest one more honorable than you be invited . . . and you . . . with shame . . . take the lowest place” (Luke 14:8-10). It’s sanctified common sense! Better to practice it now than at last.

How much does God care about you as an individual person? How important are you to Him? The biggest problem that children and youth have today is that they don’t know who they are. Oh yes, they know their names that their parents gave them, but they don’t know their true identity, they don’t sense their own self-respect or self-worth as individuals. So they drift into all sorts of evil. “Here’s nuthin’ goin’ nowhere” is the root cause of most crime and degradation, including teenage promiscuity and pregnancies that later produce a

replay of the same tragic consequences, generation after generation.

When you were born as a baby, your mother probably counted everything she could see—you had both eyes, two ears, two hands, two feet, and yes, she probably counted the toes on each one to be sure you were “normal.” She paid attention to you; you were important in her eyes. But as you grew older, you began to realize that she could not follow you around all your life, recounting your fingers and your toes; you were on your own. That’s when you began to have problems, unless you had learned somehow to believe that you have a heavenly Father who cares for you infinitely more than your father and your mother ever could.

One thing your mother never counted on you—how many hairs were on your head. Even though she cared for you she never cared that much. But Jesus makes a fantastic statement that must not be brushed off as mere exaggeration: He says in Matt. 10:29, 30 that your heavenly Father has counted all the hairs on your head! And you must not disbelieve it—Jesus says it; it has to be so. The important point is not the actual total (it would do you no good to know), but it’s Jesus’ way of saying what David said in Psalm 139:17, 18, “How precious are thy thoughts unto me, O God! how great is the sum of them! If I should count them, they are more in number than the sand.”

Now, what will you do with this? Believe it, or disbelieve it? Your happiness here and maybe forever, depends on which way you choose.

The “gospel of self-esteem” is different than “the gospel of self-respect.” The latter is from the Lord; the former can be a snare.

Both are mentioned in Romans 12:3 where the inspired apostle pleads with us: “I say through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think.” In other words, be careful: don’t give yourself an overdose of “self-esteem” thinking! Thank God for “the grace” that was given to “our beloved brother Paul” (2 Tim. 3:16). He will discourage no one; all he knows how to do is to encourage people like you and me.

So, on the other hand, he says don’t dig a hole and crawl into it: you’re worth an infinite price. Paul goes on to preach to us now the gospel of self-respect: but “through the grace given to me, [I say] to everyone that is among you, . . . think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure [*metron*, Greek] of faith.” Have you spent time in the school of Christ seeking to learn how to “think soberly” about yourself. Still seeking to learn but thankful for whatever “measure” of sobriety the Lord grants.

The Bible does not encourage self-esteem, but it does teach a genuine self-respect—the solid kind that all the devils in hell can’t undo. It’s learned from believing the following story:

At the age of thirty, Jesus of Nazareth got the news that John the Baptist was preaching repentance at the Jordan River. He told His mother Mary, “Mother, I’ve got to go. I’m laying down my saws, hammers, chisels, and I’ll never touch them again: I am going on My mission My Father has told

me of, that I've told you about since I was twelve" (Luke 2:49).

John refused to baptize Him. "I am ordained to baptize only people who have repented, and You have no sins to repent of." Then Jesus told him how He was taking the sins of the whole world upon Himself, making Himself guilty of them all, "made to be sin for us" (2 Cor. 5:21). "And yes, I have repented of them all." So John relented.

When Jesus came out of the water dripping wet, He knelt on the Jordan's banks and prayed such a prayer as the world had never heard before, nor had the angels in heaven. And something wonderful happened: the Father Himself answered Jesus verbally and audibly so the whole world could hear Him (except they didn't recognize the Voice):

"This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Matt. 3:17). And, you remember, the dove descended, as the visible Holy Spirit.

As the Father put His arms around Jesus before the whole world, He also put His arms around you, and said those same words.

"But I am a sinner," you say; "He couldn't do that to me!"

When you go to a shop and buy something for say \$10, you exchange your \$10 for an article which you believe is equivalent in value. We read that the Father "so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son . . ." You are "the world."

In other words, when the Father thinks of you with all your sins and unworthiness, He thinks of you as of equivalent value; He loves you Two equally.

You'll spend the rest of your life here (and over there) trying to understand that.

When Paul "saw" the One "who loved me, and gave Himself for me", his heart was reconciled to Christ. His experience was at-one-ment with Christ. It was the revelation of Christ's love in His sacrifice that moved Paul. Christ gave Himself up to hell—the God forsaken death—which the sinner rightfully deserved, in order that the sinner might live.

When Paul "saw" it wasn't a make-believe substitution but a shared identification with the sinner, his heart was melted and he identified with Christ. "I am crucified with Christ" (Gal. 2:20). Self cannot crucify self. God has given man the capacity to choose to identify with Christ crucified. It's called "the faith of the Son of God." One wiser than us wrote: "Again and again we shall be brought into strait places, that it may be known whether we are indeed crucified with Christ or full of self-love."⁶

Paul says, My *ego* is dead. Self-love is not the motivating factor of my faith. "Nevertheless, I live." Now the true individual lives. But it's not the old *ego* that lives. "Christ liveth in me." He is a "slave" of love, a heart appreciation of what it cost the Son of God to save him from hell itself.

True self-respect, a true sense of one's value, is rooted in the cross—the Son of God gave Himself for you; that makes you equivalent in value with Him. Why do you pay \$10 for some article? Because you believe that the \$10 is equivalent in value to the article itself. True, we have no value of

⁶ Ellen G. White, "Love Among Brethren," *Advent Review And Sabbath Herald* 61, 23 (June 3, 1884), pp. 353-354.

ourselves; but *agape* creates value in its object. Let the truth sink in: your security, your self-worth, is only “in Christ.” That’s the message He is shouting in our ears. “By love serve one another.” It therefore means consideration of others, instead of one’s self. Jesus Christ, who had greater love than is known among men, said that He “came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give His life a ransom for many” (Matt. 20:28). Said He, “I am among you as He that serveth” (Luke 22:27).

Two men, one an excellent swimmer, were watching dockside. A man was swimming a rather long way from the shore. All of a sudden the man in the water got into trouble. He began to scream for help and thrash the water. Nee turned to his friend and excitedly asked, “Aren’t you going to help him? The man is in trouble.”

“Not yet,” his friend calmly answered.

A few moments passed and the man in the lake went down and came up again, struggling and fighting for air. “Save him! Save him!” Nee begged.

“Not yet,” his friend calmly responded.

Finally, the man stopped thrashing the water and all was calm. Nee’s friend jumped into the water and with expert strokes swam to the drowning man and began to pull him to shore. Arriving at the shore, Nee’s friend administered aid, and the drowning man, coughing and sputtering, was revived.

After the incident was over, Nee confronted his friend. “Why did you wait so long to save this man? He could have drowned!”

“I had no other choice,” his friend responded. “If I would have gone to him immediately, he would have panicked and pulled me down with him. I had to wait until he stopped kicking. Then I could save him.”

Are you willing to stop kicking? Jesus bids you come to the cross. Allow His love to draw you. You grant Him permission to rescue you from drowning in a flood of self-centeredness. Appreciating the cost of His love which paid for you gives a new sense of how He values you. He may now properly use you to demonstrate love to others. In loving others you are loving the dear Saviour.