

Who do you think you are? A Christian approach in rebuilding Self-Esteem.

Time and again, clients who come to us for counselling have low self-esteem. I find myself working with self-esteem so frequently that I thought that maybe I was being a "one tool counsellor." I was seeing low self-esteem in so many contexts

In an open panel discussion at the 1991 National Christian Counsellors Association conference I asked Arch Hart the question, "How often does the low self-esteem problem arise with different issues that clients may have? Arch Hart turned to Gary Collins on the stage and asked, "70% of the time?" Gary said, "70 to 80% of the time." Arch Hart then summed up by saying that low self-esteem is epidemic in our western culture and you will find it as a component of most presenting issues of troubled clients.

Self Esteem Importance

Issues of self-esteem often appear as a component that needs therapeutic treatment with many troubled clients. Co-dependant couples are often co-dependant because of low self-esteem. Clients who have experienced trauma in childhood and who self-blame, often suffer with low self esteem. Clients suffering from anxiety often have damaged self-esteem and shattered confidence. Depressed and burnt out clients often exhibit a history of low self-esteem stemming from childhood. Just to mention a few.

Self-esteem is important because it determines our very being. "*What a man thinks within himself so he is!*" (Prv 23:7) . Healthy self-esteem also gives us a sense of realism. "*Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you.*" (Rom 12:3). So as Christian Counsellors, how do we help our clients rebuild a healthy self-esteem? First of all we need to understand, what is it that makes up our self-esteem?

Self Esteem Defined

Norman Wakefield defines self-esteem as, "the setting a value on and appreciating the worth of one self." (Wakefield, 1977.p3) Dorothy Brigs states, "High self-esteem is not noisy conceit. It is a quiet sense of self-respect, a feeling of self worth. When you have it deep inside, you are glad you are you." (Wakefield, 1977, p3)

Different authors, although using different terms, break up self-esteem into three basic component parts. To have a healthy self-esteem one first of all needs to have a good **sense of worth**. Being affirmed as a person of value, being cherished and respected. It answers the questions, "Who am I?" "Am I attractive?" "Am I valuable?" "Can I be popular?" We all need to feel worth something to someone somewhere.

Secondly we all need to have a **sense of belonging**. That is having a sense of security and identity with others who love, accept and support me. This answers the questions, "Where am I?" "Where do I fit in?" "What do others think of me?" I need to be accepted for who I am.

Thirdly, healthy self-esteem needs a good **sense of competence**. Gaining a sense of achievement and being affirmed as an able person. It answers the questions, "What can I?" "What am I good at?" "What are my successes?"

These three areas, worth belonging, and competence, combine to make up our self-esteem.

Self-esteem Sources

From a Christian perspective our primary source of self-esteem is from God. As Neil T Anderson (1999 p249) states "The most important belief about ourselves is that we are children of God and that being His child is a right given to us by God Himself" We read in Genesis 1:27, "*So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them*". We were made in the image of God to live in relationship with him and to find our sense of worth, belonging and competence with him. However, God decided to also make the parents the channel of His self-esteem to us by giving them the responsibility to pass on the knowledge of God and model that living relationship with Him. This is one of the blessings when Israel obeyed the great Shema. "*Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children.*" (Deut 6:4-9).

From our childhood on we paint an image of ourselves using the colours primarily given to us by our parents. It has been said that the most significant parent is the father who impacts our self-esteem because his love

comes with authority and approval whereas mum's love often comes with affection. My counselling experience has shown me, however, that it is the authority figure in the home, mother or father, who impacts and shapes our self-esteem as children. Our schoolyard experiences, religious training, and relationships with others also contribute to the colours the brightness or dullness of the self-esteem with which we live as adults. Unfortunately because our parents are sinners and imperfect and because our childhood environment is part of a fallen sinful world, the self-esteem that God desires for us has been blocked and we seek our self esteem in unhealthy and even obsessive and driven ways, in what McGee (1990, p 40) describes as "self-esteem traps."

Self Esteem Traps

Performance Trap

The bait is, "Success will bring me fulfilment and happiness!" The belief is "I must meet certain standards in order to feel good about myself!" The fear is, that I will fail and not meet these standards. The trap is, perfectionism, workaholism, avoidance of risks, either of which can result in anger or resentment of criticism, anxiety of not being able to perform well or burn out and depression.

Approval Trap

The bait is, "Acceptance of others is the key to my fulfilment and happiness." The belief is, "I must be approved by certain others to feel good about myself". The fear is of being rejected and overlooked. The trap is, giving in to peer pressure, living without boundaries, or having the inability to give or receive love out of fear of rejection.

Blame Game Trap

The bait is "In order to accept myself I blame others and lower them down." The belief is "All others are no better than me and need to be brought down". The fear is, being caught out as guilty without being able to blame others. The trap is, negative blaming of others, blame ourselves, or we blame God.

Shame trap

The bait is, "There is something wrong in me that can never be repaired." The belief is, "I must always live as the person that I am, I can not change." The fear is, of being exposed without sympathy by others. The trap is, being trapped into procrastination, lack of motivation, or depression.

Many clients who have suffered abuse, experienced trauma, or have come out of a dysfunctional home in childhood, may exhibit some or many of the above symptoms to cope with their low self-esteem. The question is, what do we as Christian counsellors do to facilitate rebuilding a positive self-esteem?

Self Esteem "in Christ"

In counselling Christians I have used the "in Christ" concept from the Scriptures. The "in Christ" concept highlights the status that God's children have been raised to, by the death, resurrection and ascension of our Lord. It lays out our identity as God's children and it explains our worth, belonging, and competence in terms of what Jesus has done for us and not what we do for God. It is striking that Scripture uses only one text to describe "Christ in me" but uses ninety-two verses highlighting "in Christ", that is, who we are and have in Christ our representative's accomplishments.

If all Christians saw themselves the way that God sees them, understood how they have been raised with Christ, kept focussed on this truth about them selves, then all Christians would have a healthy self-esteem. They would be able to avoid the self-esteem traps that are so limiting and destructive. Although it is true that affirmation, inclusion and approval from significant others is also important in building ones self esteem, the advantage of seeing ones worth, belonging and achievement in terms of how God sees us in Christ gives us a self esteem, a self belief that is stable, objective and beyond our circumstances

In counselling non-Christians, those who have no relationship with God, I have discovered that the vast majority of them are open to examine the "in Christ" concept. I have found that nearly all non-church goers believe in "God" but don't believe in the church and are open to listen to what the Bible says on what God thinks of them. At this point I am careful not to impose my own values or beliefs on the client but share as an option to be considered what has worked for me and for many other clients. On the rare occasion when a client desires not to examine the "in Christ" concept I then get the client to focus on the character, talents and adult strengths that

the client has today to still the voices of the past.

In dealing with those who are open to build their self-esteem in terms of the "in Christ" concept I have with a great deal of blessings and growth for clients used the following approaches to introduce worth, belonging and achievement in terms of who we are "in Christ"

Worth "in Christ"

In sharing this concept with Christians I ask, "If you won a gift voucher and it entitled you to go to Bunnings and chose any cordless drill set they have and you go into the store and find fifty different sets on display ranging from \$55 in price to \$1500 in price, which would you chose? Invariably clients chose from the higher end of the price scale. Upon examining this we discover the principle from which they are functioning is, that generally the price reflects the value.

I then ask clients to read 1 Pet 1:18-19. "*For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.*" As we work through this passage we discover that God the father brought us not using perishable things like silver or gold but with the precious to God, blood of His son. Applying the principle that the price reflects the value, I ask the client, "How much then are you worth?" Most clients answer, "a lot." Thinking this through we discover that as far as God is concerned, because He paid the price of His precious son Jesus, then we are worth, one on one, a precious Jesus. It almost sounds blasphemous but this is what Peter is saying to the severely persecuted church and to us today.

After examining the feelings this evokes, I ask, "If you walked out of the counselling room with a strong sense of being worth a Jesus and you had to face your struggles this week, what difference would it make for you?" Invariably the answer would be, "I would feel more confident, stronger, decisive etc." The homework that week is to focus on the fact that they are worth a Jesus. Some clients have displayed a price tag and place a "J" on it to remind them of the worth that God has given them "in Christ".

Belonging "in Christ"

In sharing the concept of belonging "in Christ" I draw on my whiteboard ten circles within each other with a dot in the middle. I introduce this drawing as a picture of the family of God. God is at the centre with Jesus. The circles are grading of Christians who are close to God on the inner circle and Christians on the outer edge of the family of God. I ask my client "Where would you place yourself in the family of God?" Most put themselves at about halfway in.

We then open the Bible at 2 Cor 1:20-21 where we read, "*Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.*"

Working through this passage we discover that we stand firm in Christ's merits right at the centre. God has set us apart with his anointing. He has set his seal of ownership on us and we have His Spirit as a guarantee. Established in Christ we belong as much as Jesus does, right in the centre with God. In Christ we couldn't belong any more if we tried.

Then I ask the question, "If you walked out of the counselling room with this strong sense of being firmly established and belonging as much as Jesus does, and you had to face your struggles this week, what difference would it make for you?" Invariably the answer would be, "I feel so relieved. I don't have to prove anything. I am free from having to earn points for God's or anyone else's approval." The homework that week is to focus on how much they belong in God's family

Competence "in Christ"

In sharing this concept I ask my clients to imagine themselves in a marathon foot race. "You have run twenty kilometres and you are now coming into the last one hundred meters. I say, imagine being in a bunch of runners and anyone could win. However you focus on the finishing line where the tape is glimmering in the sun and your eye falls on the prize table behind the line. You see prizes and you see the big trophy for the winner and lo and behold your name is on the trophy. You are the winner already even though you have not completed the race. I ask, "What difference would it make to your running knowing that you have already won?" Invariably

the immediate answer is, "I would relax and slacken off." Upon further reflection clients say, "No, I would run with more confidence, more boldly, even straining ahead, I can't lose!"

We then open the Bible at Phil 3:13-14 where we read, "*Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.*"

Upon examining this text we discover that life is a race and we are still running. However in Christ we are already victors, we already have the prize because Jesus has done it for me. I believe that in this passage as in many other places Paul is highlighting the "already" (what we already have in Christ) and the "not yet" (that we need to strive living thankfully, living focussed on who we are already. This means that we can leave the past behind and run more boldly and confidently keeping our eye on who we are in Christ.

Again I ask the question, "If you walked out of the counselling room with this strong sense of being a victor in Christ, and you had to face your struggles this week, what difference would it make for you?" Invariably the answer would be, "My past no longer needs to define who I am. I can leave my past behind because Jesus the victor now defines me. I can now live more confidently and more boldly." The homework for that week is to focus on the victory they already have in Christ.

These passages are just a small sample of the many passages that define our identity, self-esteem, our worth, belonging and competence in Christ. Working with clients issues and applying this new self perspective has given many clients amazing freedom to disassociate with negative thinking, low self-esteem habits and has liberated them to grow in confidence and purpose.

Finding their self-esteem, their sense of worth, belonging and competence "in Christ" has enabled clients to define their self-esteem apart from their past, their relationships and their circumstances. This in turn has enabled them to deal more objectively with these contexts because their worth, their identity is not dependant on it as well. In the storms of life there is an objective, authoritative beyond the storms, source of self-esteem that helps one to cope even to the point of saying with Paul, "*I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength.*" (Phil. 4:12-13).

References

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Note about the author

Bill Van Schie has been in pastoral ministry in local congregations for more than thirty one years and has been involved in planting five churches. He has a Bachelor of Divinity and Master of Arts (Counselling) and has taught counselling in Theological and Bible Colleges. He has been published in the area of Pre-Marital Counselling and has developed a Christ Centred Self-Esteem program through which many have found their sense of worth, belonging and competence as they have redefined their identity "in Christ." Bill now works in private practice, conducts seminars and workshops for churches, schools and counselling agencies as well as co-ordinates the Careforce Lifekeys Counselling Centre in Mt Evelyn.