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An Investigation into Poor Self-Esteem

Some Suggestions for Effective Counselling of College and University Students in Malaysia and Singapore

Siew Yau Man

IN MY TIME as staffmember with the Fellowship of Evangelical Students (FES) of Malaysia, I encountered many college and university students suffering from poor self-image and an inferiority complex.[1] These students almost always put themselves down before others when called to take responsibilities, saying, "I can't do this" or "I'm not good enough". Some are easily threatened and usually feel insecure. Even among "leaders" such feelings can be easily discerned.[2]

Although I do not have the figures, there is good reason to believe that inferiority and poor self-esteem is a widespread and debilitating problem among the general Malaysian and Singaporean student population.[3] My conviction is that we should learn to understand this crippling phenomenon so as to be better and more effective counsellors when confronted with the issue.

In this essay I hope to contribute towards this objective. The paper is divided into three main sections. After a brief definition of self-esteem, the first section seeks to understand the Biblical concept of self-worth. The second looks into the possible causes and effects of low self-esteem among university and college students in Malaysia and Singapore. Lastly, equipped with this knowledge, I will suggest some counselling principles to help address the issue.[4]

What is Self-Esteem?

Self-esteem speaks of the self-evaluative dimension of the self-concept and has to do with one's sense of self-worth. It is a measure of how we feel about ourselves and how well we accept ourselves. People differ in their levels of self-esteem. It is found that people with positive self-esteem are often optimistic, happy and generally well-adjusted. Conversely, low self-esteem has been associated with an entire series of psychological and physical dysfunctions.[5] Thus psychologists, cognizant of the centrality of self-esteem issues in psychological well-being, see enhancement of one's self-esteem as an essential therapeutic goal in their clients' treatment.[6]

THE BIBLICAL CONCEPT OF SELF-ESTEEM AND SELF-WORTH

The Confusion

It is easy to be confused today if one listens to what the Church is saying with regards to self-image. On the one hand, aligning with popular psychology, is the laudable desire to build self-respect, emphasizing the need to love ourselves. I believe Robert Schuller slants towards this position.[7] In fact, Schuller sees belief in one's self-worth, rather than highlighting one's sin, as the first crucial step to effective evangelism.[8] On the other hand, fundamentalists and Calvinistic circles, presenting a radical perversion of the doctrine of total depravity, over-accentuates the negative by constantly emphasizing our sinfulness and glossing over our newness in Christ.[9] Thus, we find Christians like Jay Adams, a renowned counsellor, highly critical of terms like "self-esteem", "self-love" and "self-image."[10] In a similar view, Paul Vitz, in his perceptive book, cites the following as an illustration of "selfist jargon": "I love me. I am not conceited. I'm just a good friend to myself. And I like to do what makes me feel good...."[11]

How are we to make sense of this apparent dichotomy? Both camps seem to cite valid Biblical support. Unless the counsellor resolves this tension he will be ineffective in helping the students to arrive at a healthy biblical view.

A Resolution

With characteristic clarity, John Stott brilliantly resolves the tension between the needs of self-affirmation and self-denial. He believes that the answer lies in the Cross.[12] He sees the Cross as both the model for the denial of our "fallen" self and the measure of the value of our "true" self.

When Jesus admonishes us to take up our cross and follow Him (Mk 8.34), He provides us a vivid imagery of self-denial, because it speaks ultimately of execution. No one who carries the cross returns alive. In Swete's words, to take up our cross is to "put ourselves into the position of a condemned criminal on his way to execution.[13] "Vividly, Stott suggests that to deny ourselves is to behave towards ourselves as Peter did towards Jesus in his denial. The same verb means, disowning, repudiation, and turning one's back. Rather than depriving oneself of luxuries, self-denial is to disown and renounce one's supposed right of way. In this, we see the model of self-denial in the cross.

The Cross also speaks of the great worth of human beings. It is undoubtedly human worth which gave Jesus the determination to suffer and die. He is the Good Shepherd who seeks the lost sheep and willingly gives His life for them.

The chief need in resolving this apparent tension is for discernment in our self-understanding. We are to discern that our "self" is partly good (the "Imago Dei" of Creation) and partly bad (the defaced image of the Fall). When Jesus speaks of self-denial, He refers to the denial of the fallen self. In so doing, we shall find our true self, validating Jesus' words in Lk 9.24. Thus, "true self-denial is not the road to self-destruction, but the road to self-discovery."[14]

Other Scriptural Considerations

We must keep in mind that alongside Jesus' explicit call to self-denial is His implicit call to self-affirmation. In His teaching, He speaks of human "value" in God's sight (Mt 6.26; 12.12). In His attitude towards people, He despised and rejected no one. Rather, he honored the dishonorable and accepted the despised (Mk 14.1-11; Jn 4.1-26).

Stott argues persuasively, giving three reasons, that the Mosaic injunction, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself," is not a command to love ourselves.[15] First, it is grammatically impossible as the command is one and not two.[16] Secondly, it is linguistically inept because agape love means self-sacrifice in the service of others (therefore cannot be self-directed). Third, it is theologically unsound because the Bible calls self-love a sin (2 Ti 3.1-4).

One of the greatest examples of a man who demonstrates biblical self-esteem is Paul. Refusing to conform to heroic stereotypes of Greek mythology, highly regarded by the false "super apostles", he rebutted his accusers in an outstanding counter-attack.[17] Since he had no alternative, he played the fool and talks about himself to bring home his point. But his "boasting" is an essay in irony. Rather than outlining prestigious missionary accomplishments, he catalogues persecutions experienced (23-25), dangers encountered (25, 26) and deprivations endured (27). Contrary to expectations, he was not the young Hercules, glowing with self-confidence and triumph, but rather his labours left him with an ever deepening awareness of personal inadequacy (29). What kind of an apostle was he? He was the kind who when the going gets tough, gets going! (30-33). He was not the military hero who climbs into fortresses to capture them. He climbs out of the fortresses to avoid being captured himself![18] We have much to learn from Paul, who preferred his reputation to be based not on conjuring one's self-image but on verifiable character and teaching (2 Co 12.6).

Perhaps we need to re-read and rethink the parable of Jesus in Luke 17.7-10, especially v.10: "So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty!'" Rather than encouraging unhealthy self-esteem, this verse points to the appropriate duty of servanthood in our relationship to God, our rightful Master. I cannot imagine the response if we use this verse to reply to compliments after delivering a "good" sermon at church! I believe that we can only get a clear view of biblical self-esteem when we capture this double vision and bring them into one focus: seeing ourselves as God sees us, and seeing ourselves humbly before God.

CAUSES AND EFFECTS OF LOW SELF-ESTEEM

The way we feel about ourselves[19]

Joseph John highlights that social psychologists believe that the self-concept is affected not only by my perception of who I am (content component), but also how I feel about who I am (feeling component).[20] Feeling good about ourselves is not normally something that is experienced with respect to the whole of ourselves. It is possible to feel good about some areas of our lives but not about others. Therefore a positive self-concept is comprised of a composite picture of different feelings about ourselves.

One area that some students have difficulty accepting is their body, whether it be protuding teeth, a large nose, or an obese body. There is apparent correlation between body-image and self-image. It is difficult

for someone who completely despises his body to like himself. This dislike of certain body parts or one's physique probably has its origins in negative comments received or when unfavourable comparisons are made with one's peers.

A second area where students have difiiculty feeling good about how they present themselves to others. This is loosely referred to as what is commonly called "personality." A widely accepted notion is that there are two personality types, 'extrovert' and 'introvert', with the latter being burdensome and problematic. Students commonly say, "He just has the personality for it, and that makes all the difference in relationships."

Some students have difficulty feeling good about their past. In my counselling, I have often encountered students with an unpleasant past. Some were constantly put down by parents and called a failure. One had a traumatic experience of an alcoholic father with daily family conflicts. Once, she was nearly sexually assaulted by some men on the way home from university. Children with divorced parents are often resentful and even 'hate' their parents and their past. They feel shy to speak about themselves (or their family) or invite their friends home, and appear inferior among their peers from a normal 'happy' home.

At times, male students have difficulty feeling good about certain feelings. Asian society generally denigrates or plays down the role of feelings among men, (E.g., sadness, weeping and anger). Feelings are largely portrayed as a feminine trait and therefore discouraged in men. A popular Chinese saying is, "shed blood, but don't shed tears!" Thus, feelings are often bottled up and an emotional male is generally frowned upon.

The way we talk to ourselves

Collins highlights the danger of a distorted theology which can reinforce low self-worth.[21] If a believer's internal dialogue focuses on sin and guilt, and feeling worthless before God, then it is easy for them to feel worthless before others and on their own. A balanced biblical theology gives equivocal emphasis to human worth and sin.

Often it is mere negative statements about ourselves (often untrue and without basis) which result in low self-esteem. If we have learned (programmed) certain negative sentences about ourselves, that is how we will see ourselves (E.g., I am stupid, I am ugly, I am a born failure).[22] According to Meichenbaum (and Ellis) the difficulty with many clients is that their "internal dialogue consists of negative self-statements and images."[23]

The Pressure of Competitive Society and Unrealistic Expectations

The pressures of competitive living often present unrealistic expectations and ideals before students. When these expectations are not met, feelings of inferiority and failure follow.

Asian society places a high premium on getting into university. A degree is often the passport to a better life, bringing with it, status and general economic well-being. In an attempt to produce economic success and maintain industrial growth, the Singapore Government constantly stresses the development of a highly competent workforce, its only resource.[24] Children begin qualifying examinations at nine and fourteen years old and are streamed into high achievers and low achievers, each with their own classes. In an effort not to lose out, parents put enormous pressure upon their children to succeed; they have to compete to get into the best class, the 'elite' schools and achieve the best results.[25] Extra curricular activities are not exempted from this high-pressured rat race. Swimmers must swim faster, ballet dancers must out-perform, and budding musicians must advance faster in grades than their neighbours.

In Malaysia, similar pressures exist. Since the predominantly Malay Government introduced the New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1969, the Chinese community has had to struggle for economic and educational survival.[26] Non-Malay students have to fight among themselves to secure a place among the limited number of allotted places in the state universities. The NEP has, in no uncertain terms, portrayed that if you are not a Malay, you're second class.

Narramore perceptively outlines three common "enemies of self-acceptance", unrealistic assumptions which many people have learned to accept, even though it undermines self-esteem:

"I must meet other people's standards and expectations if I am to be accepted and loved."

"Whenever I fail to reach my goals and expectations (or those of other people) I need to be pressured, shamed, frightened and punished."

"I must seek to master my world, to be in charge, to be smart, to be the center of my environment, and to make my own decisions."[27]

Faced with the pressures of competitive society, racial prejudice and an unhealthy harboring of unrealistic expectations, it is surprising if we do not have more students with self-esteem problems.

The Family of Origin

This is perhaps the most important factor in the development of self-esteem (or lack of it). It is widely accepted that a child's self-esteem is formed during the early years.[28] Virginia Satir, a well-known family

therapist, believes that the family is directly responsible for one's state of personal self-worth.[29]

Feelings of inferiority arise when parents shame, criticize, reject or imply that their children are a nuisance, stupid or incompetent. It is not uncommon for Asian parents to unfavourably compare their children among themselves or with their peers, with the hope of motivating them to better performance. Thus, even when a child has done relatively well in class, he or she is directed to the neighbour's child or his or her own brother/sister who has done even better. This often sets unrealistic goals for the child and when he or she fails to attain them, the implication is that the child is stupid or incompetent.[30]

Inferiority also can arise when parents do not openly show affection to their children. This is a common problem in Chinese homes. The reasons are two-fold. Firstly, interpersonal relationship are very clearly defined in traditional Chinese culture.[31] The probable fear is that if one is too close to one's children, this delicate pattern of authority and honour is disturbed, resulting in a loss of due respect. This also means that Chinese parents seldom praise their own children or openly express appreciation.

Secondly, it is important to understand that Chinese parents differ from their Western counterparts in the way they demonstrate their love to their children.[32] While Western parents would send birthday cards and flowers to express love, Oriental parents hardly ever give birthday cards or tell their children, "I love you" or hug or cuddle them in any physical way. The way love is demonstrated is to provide for their daily needs, like buying new clothes or taking the family for weekly "dim sum" at the restaurant.[33] Undoubtedly, we should recognise the validity of cultural variations in demonstrating parental love. Unfortunately, Chinese students today, influenced by Western-thinking (Western TV programmes, e.g., the Cosby Show), and separated by the 'generation gap', may imply that this lack of open affection means an absence of parental love. This wrong notion is reinforced when Oriental families, schooled in the disciplinarian system, often tend to punish wrong behaviour harshly and at times, repeatedly.

One way of understanding the influence of the Family of Origin upon one's self-worth is to look at that family in terms of expectations and support.[34] Not surprisingly, students with low self-worth often come from a "high expectation-low support" family model.

In summary, it is wise to heed to the words of this old folk wisdom, which stresses the influence of family upbringing upon self-worth:

Children learn what they live [35]

If a child lives with criticism,
He learns to condemn.
If a child lives with hostility,
He learns to fight.
If a child lives with ridicule,
He learns to be shy.
If a child lives with shame,
He learns to feel guilty.
If a child lives with tolerance,
He learns to be patient.
If a child lives with encouragement,
He learns confidence.
If a child lives with praise,
He learns to appreciate.
If a child lives with fairness,
He learns justice.
If a child lives with security,
He learns to have faith.
If a child lives with approval,
He learns to like himself.
If a child lives with acceptance and friendship,
He learns to find love in the world.

SOME COUNSELLING PRINCIPLES [36]

Provide a Correct Biblical Perspective on Self-Esteem

Some counselees raised in a distorted theology of self, need to be convinced that humility is not inferiority and that a healthy self-esteem is not equivalent to sinful pride. They must be helped to see the biblical teaching about human worth and self-esteem and learn that unjustified self-condemnation is both destructive and wrong in God's sight. Needless to say, it is imperative for counsellors to be theologically informed to be effective.

Provide Genuine Support, Acceptance, Aproval and P.L.A.E.

A wise counsellor should refrain from inappropriate exhortations because people with low self-esteem tend to "back off" and respond negatively to unrealistic, abrupt, or ungenuine approval. It is more helpful to give continuing support, gentle encouragement, and mild, but sincere approval when achievements clearly call for it.

With such varied and often masked symptoms, the counsellor should proceed cautiously, using primary level accurate empathy (P.L.A.E.).[37]

Coping with Bad Feelings about Ourselves.

Accepting one's body and feeling good about it is essential to a positive self-image. This begins when the counselee learns to love his or her body, and recognises that certain features are much more refined than others. Loving one's body involves accepting both "assets" and "liabilities" and realizing that God has made a unique individual in me.

Learning to feel good about the way we present ourselves to others is part of a healthy self-image. The false notion of 'extrovert' and 'introvert' personality types should be disbanded. The truth is that one is neither always one nor the other. We present different aspects of ourselves to the world, depending on who we relate to and the situation we are in. Affirming these varied aspects of my person is being aware of who I am.[38] Comfortably self-assured, I am then able to confidently present myself to others.

Countering bad feelings about one's unpleasant past means the counselee must be gently helped to come to grips with it. Rather than a denial of what happened and defacing history, sometimes we may need to repent of clear Scriptural violations. Other times, the need is to creatively interpret what has transpired.[39]

Lastly, counselees must learn to feel good about expressing feelings and emotions. Feelings, as much as reason, have an important role in human function. While God gives joy and gladness, He also gives sorrow, sadness and anger. Perhaps the greatest lesson of Job is that in his misery, he voiced his anger to God and thereby kept in touch with the Creator! One of the shortest verses in Scripture provides our greatest lesson, "Jesus wept" (Jn 11.35). Rather than an unhealthy suppression of feelings, deeming them unacceptable to others (and to ourselves), we should explore appropriate ways of expressing them.

Coping with Negative Self-Talk

Albert Ellis believes that self defeating ideas resulting from a lack of self-worth are a serious cause of emotional disturbance. The counselor's task is "to help the client get rid of illogical, irrational ideas and attitudes and substitute logical, rational ideas and attitudes for them".[40]

Ill-effects of negative self-talk should be highlighted to counselees. It is useful to help counselees see that many of these negative statements are often untrue and without basis.

Counselees should be encouraged to pause in the middle of negative self-talk and think through what is happening inside. This may include

describing the negative thinking cycle or the specific blockade to oneself and then asking how one's faith both informs and counteracts these thoughts and feelings.[41]

A most helpful exercise is to encourage the counselee to write out his or her own good traits, strengths and assets as well as weakness, inabilities, and other undesirable characteristics. As the list is developed, ask, "What is the objective evidence that each item on the list (both positive and negative) should be there?" What past experiences or other people's opinions can be cited? Throughout this exercise, it is imperative to emphasize the counselee's strong points, special talents or gifts, and consider how each can be put to better use. It is usual for people to focus on their weakness and bypass or deny clear God-given talents and gifts.[42]

Lastly, we do well to heed the wisdom of two relevant Scriptural verses. Pr 23.7 says, "As a man thinks in his heart, so is he," and Pr 17.22, "A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones."

Coping with Pressures of Competitive Living

Counselees must be shown that they are fully accepted not because of any merit from academic excellence, but because of who they are. Grades (whether good or bad) is not a measure of one's worth.[43] This is not the way God deals with us; we do not and can never earn God's favour.

They should learn that it is not important to live up to unrealistic expectations, whether they be of their peers, parents or society in general. It is more important to do one's best and be true to one's God-given abilities in any endeavour. The question, "Have I done my best" is more important than, "What grades did I get?"

In societies which price excellence and encourage competitive living, counsellors must consciously demonstrate the importance and worth of other values. In Stott's words, there must be effective Christian counter-culture. Anthony Yeo, a respected Singaporean Christian counsellor and family therapist, deliberately refuses to send his children to 'elite' schools. Although he expects a certain amount of academic work from them, he does not force his children and give undue pressure to perform well.

Lastly, we should develop a clear theology of failure and weakness.[44] Gene's family fully accepted failure and sees it as an opportunity to learn something new. In fact, they usually have a celebration if one of them fails in any endeavour! This is not to rejoice in failure, but to be thankful for life's important lessons. They are then encouraged to try again. It is important to remind ourselves that the Bible is full of "failures", who by

the power of God, changed the course of history – Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses and David are among them. Only the Lord Jesus was not a failure, and even then, he went through immense suffering.

Perhaps Paul is the greatest exponent of the theology of weakness. Against the background of Greek culture which encouraged impressive and supernatural power of "super apostles", he boasted of trials and "a thorn in the flesh". Although speculation has raged about Paul's "thorn", it was probably a physical ailment, the weakness which his rivals found so contemptible. For Paul, it was a consequence of his spiritual pilgrimage, a prophylactic against the kind of Corinthian boasting and revelling he so fiercely countered. Weakness was no handicap in Paul's ministry, because converts won by such a "weakling" were clear trophies of God's grace. A clear theology of weakness expounds the strength of weakness, for in it, God's strength is perfected. (2 Co 12.1-10). Not surprisingly, in God's paradoxical academy, weakness is its chief qualification!

Coping with Unhealthy Family of Origin

Good parenting presents constant challenges and no one can claim to be faultless. Counselees with a clear history of an unhealthy Family of Origin, should be asked to forgive their parents. They should see that while it was bad to apply undue pressure and make unreasonable comparisons, the intentions were good.[45]

Other sensible efforts at restoring self-worth include helping students see the dynamic influences and forces in the family of origin and how they shape one's self-worth. The unique way Oriental parents show affection to their children can be discussed.

Scripture clearly points out that comparing ourselves to others is a self-defeating process (Jn 21.21). Unhealthy and unrealistic expectations should not be followed. Make it known that God makes one unique because He has a specific use of him or her in His specific plan.

Finally, it is worthwhile to remember that reorientating one's thinking about oneself is a challenge requiring the insight of the Spirit and the participation of the community. This means a great deal of help must come from the worship, preaching, teaching and fellowship of a healthy Christian community. Only then will it give permission for healing to begin.

Conclusion

Poor self-worth is a debilitating problem among many college and university students in Malaysia and Singapore. The counsellor and the Christian community plays a vital role in the understanding, counselling

and prevention of these problems. It is imperative for us to be familiar with the issues and be prepared for effective management. This involves wrestling with the apparent confusion in the church today and arriving at a clear biblical teaching on self-esteem. Also we need a clear understanding of the causes and effects of low self-worth to effectively deal with the problem. Perhaps the greatest challenge is to ask how often we have openly and sensitively spoken at student meetings about the issues of self-worth. When was it last done? The cry for help is there, if only we listen carefully. Thankfully, the resources for effective healing is available, but we must learn to use them wisely and carefully.

End Notes

1. This is particularly apparent among students at Tunku Abdul Rahman College (TAR College), a private tertiary institution offering professional and external degrees from the UK. The majority of students here have not done well enough to secure a place in the government universities, which requires high grades for entry, particularly for the Chinese.
2. Every year FES Malaysia sponsors a two-day leadership consultation for leaders of all the chapters among the seven universities and colleges in the country. Here, students come together to share ideas, evaluate the work and develop a common strategic program for outreach and growth. While student leaders report from their respective colleges, staffmembers provde resource and encourage reflection and strategic thinking. Leaders from TAR College are often hesitant to participate in this event. Deep within the conviction is, "I'm quite sure I'll be out of place there."
3. These students are often from a generally negative family environment and face extremely high and unrealistic expectations. Anthony Yeo, a Singaporean counsellor and family therapist with the Care and Counselling Center, reports a significant increase in the number of children seeking psychiatric consultation in recent years. These extreme pressures are no different in Malaysia. Interestingly, physician Maxwell Maltz estimates that 95% of all people in western society feel inferior! Quoted in Gary Collins, *Christian Counselling : A Comprehensive Guide* (Rev. Edn.) (Waco, Texas : Word, 1988) p.313.
4. I find Gary Collins' general approach in his book helpful. Here, I adapt and follow some of his line of inquiry into a particular counselling issue. Collins, op. cit., p.12.
5. Collins outlines the pervasive influence of self-esteem over one's activities, behaviours and affective experiences. "Virtually all human actions, feelings, attitudes, thoughts and values are affected." Collins, op. cit., p.320. Family therapist, Virginia Satir, writes that "the crucial factor in what happens both inside people and between people is the picture of individual worth that each person carries around with him". V. Satir, *Peoplemaking* (Palo Alto, Calif. : Science and Behaviour, 1972), p.21.
6. Aycock finds negative self-esteem to be the most prevalent client difficulty presented in general counselling therapy. D.W. Aycock "Self-Esteem and the Christian", *Christian Education Journal* 9, no. 1: 109-118, 1988.

7. See "Hard Questions for Robert Schuller about Sin and Self-Esteem" *Christianity Today* 28 (10 Aug 1984) pp.14-21
8. "Hard Questions" pp.15-16.
9. See E.W. McAllister "The Self-Concept Structure of Evangelical/ Fundamentalist Ministers", *Journal of Psychology and Christianity*, Vol.1 (Winter 1982) p.14.
10. Adams believes that the Bible is not intended to "make us satisfied with ourselves as we are, but to destroy any satisfaction that may exist....You must treat yourself like a criminal, and put self to death every day." Jay E. Adams, *The Biblical View of Self-Esteem, Self-Love and Self-Image*. (Eugene, Oreg.: Harvest House, 1986) p.79, 106.
11. Paul Vitz, *Psychology as Religion: The Cult of Self-Worship* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1977).
12. J. R. W. Stott. "Am I supposed to love Myself or hate Myself?" *Christianity Today* 28 (20 April 1984), 26-28. Here, I summarise his helpful points.
13. Quoted in Stott, op.cit., p.26.
14. Stott, op.cit., p.28
15. Stott, op.cit., p.26
16. Jesus did not say the second and third commandments are to love our neighbour and ourselves, but that the second commandment is to love our neighbour as we love ourselves. In this case, self-love is a fact we should recognize (indeed to be used as our guide) but it is not a virtue to be commended.
17. This counter-attack begins in 2 Co 10.1. Particularly helpful is 2 Co 11.16-33. I came across this passage in my quiet time and see it as highly appropriate to the discussion. I am indebted to Roy Clements who wrote the thoughts in SU Daily Notes, Oct/Dec 1988.
18. See E.A. Judge "The Conflict of Educational Aims in NT Thought", *Journal of Christian Education* Vol 9.1, June 1966. Judge insightfully notices the terrific anti-climax caused by vv. 32,33 and offers convincing arguments for its structure. In Paul's time the most famous award for bravery was the golden crown medal, the *corona muralis*, awarded to the first man over the wall of a city that was attacked. Here, Paul is moving towards the climax of his achievements in the work of the gospel. Has he received the *corono muralis?* Yes (v.31) but the feat (32,33) was most unexpected. Soldiers get it by going up a wall; Paul came down in a basket! The parody is complete. He is boasting of his weakness.
19. Joseph John, "Feeling Good About Ourselves", *Impact* (Singapore: Impact Christian Communications Ltd.) Feb-Mar. 1988, 54-57 points out that our self-concept is greatly affected by the way we

feel about different aspects of ourselves. Here I adapt and use some of his helpful thoughts.

20. See also N.Branden in *Self-Esteem*, ed. C.Ellison (Oklahoma City: Southwestern , 1976).
21. "Within the Christian Community there has been a tendency to emphasize human inadequacy and worthlessness consider for example, a hymn like "Amazing Grace" which speaks of human wretchedness or the familiar phrase in another hymn, "Would he devote that sacred head for such a worm as I." G. Collins, *Christian Counselling* (Waco: Word, 1980) p.348.
22. Dr Roy Bell insightfully comments that when we think like that about ourselves, good news is always doubted, bad news is always believed! Bell "Self-Worth : The Achilles Heel of Evangelical Christianity", *Introduction to Christian Counselling* class notes, p.13.
23. Quoted in Bell op.cit., p.8
24. The Singapore Government has introduced a system where graduates enjoy greater benefits in society. Children from these homes have priority to enter the public 'elite' schools. In an effort to reduce the high number of single graduate girls, a government sponsored agency, the Social Development Unit, exists to match single graduate girls to single graduate men. The notion is that this will issue in more gifted children.
25. It is not surprising to find Singaporean students having to take extra tuition classes from private teachers after regular school hours. This has resulted in a booming trade for tuition centres, while studies have become a tiresome chore! It is not surprising that the number of children seeking psychiatric help has significantly increased. Reported in the *Malay Mail Magazine* (Kuala Lumpur: New Straits Times Publications, 1987).
26. Malaysia has a multi-racial composition of approximately 55% Malays, 35% Chinese and 10% Indians, with the Chinese controlling a major portion of the economic wealth. The NEP was set up as an ambitious 20-year program to eradicate poverty and redress this socio-economic imbalance. Various policies for trade and education were formulated to favour the Malays to help them catch up, since they have unequal abilities. Current opinion is doubtful about the NEP's success, and divided over its continuance. See Suhaini Aznam and Hamish McDonald "Ethic Economics" *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 22 June 1989, 28-33.
27. S.Bruce Narramore, *You Are Someone Special* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1978), 29.

28. Dorothy C. Briggs, *Your Child's Self-Esteem* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday-Dolphin, 1975).
29. Virginia Satir, op. cit., p.3.
30. In 1987, I met a university student who hated his parents because they often unfavorably compared him to his elder brother. He had decided that after his arts degree, he was going to take Law, to prove his parents wrong. His whole purpose of life seemed to be bent on achieving this one objective.
31. This is an influence of Confucian teaching. Confucius advocates the "rectification of names". Titles like father, mother, grandmother etc., dictate appropriate relationships and behaviour patterns, providing the base for filial piety. To address a person correctly is to see his position of honor, giving due respect and a demonstration of filial piety. Thus in traditional Chinese culture, interpersonal relationships are clearly defined. There are definite terms for father, mother, elder sister, younger sister, elder brother and younger brother. Relatives on the father's side have different terms from relatives on the mother's side. See Lee Chong Kau, "Bridging the Social, Cultural and Relegious Gaps", in *Howto Speak to our Elders about Christ* (Singapore: OMF Publishers, 1986) p.15.
32. Lee Chong Kau, "Parent Children Sensitivities" in op. cit., pp.19-20.
33. Children of Chinese homes will receive a new set of clothes and shoes every Chinese New Year. A weekly outing to the restaurant, often on Sunday morning is a common feature too.
34. See Appendix after Endnotes. I am thankful to Bell, op.cit., p.9a. from which I gather this information.
35. Quoted in Bell, op.cit., p.12.
36. While it is imperative that the counsellor should be proficient in good, general counselling techniques and the counselling process (see Collins, op.cit., pp.15-74), other guidelines pertaining to counselling a person with low self-esteem are essential.
37. A paper of this length does not allow me to describe P.L.A.E. but this is critical in counselling, especially those with low self-esteem. See Gerald Egan, *Exercises in Helping Skills* (Monterey: Brooks/Cole, 1985), also G. Egan, *The Skilled Helper* (Belmont, Calif.: Brooks/Cole, 1986).
38. I think John Powell has a relevant word here. He asks, "Why am I afraid to tell you who I am?" and answers, "...because if I tell you I am, you may not like who I am, and it's all that I have." J. Powell, *Why am I afraid to tell you who I am?* (Calif.: Tabor, 1969). In this sense, self-acceptance is not my problem, but that of the other person who cannot accept me.

39. Joseph John is certainly right when he says, "As much as bad history has never led to good knowledge, so poor or faulty interpretation has never paved the way for a healthy evaluation of the past, the present or even the unforeseeable future." John, op.cit., p.55.
40. For a summary of Ellis' 'rational-emotive therapy', see C.H. Paterson, *Theories of Counselling and Psychotherapy* (New York: Harper and Row,1986), pp.9f. While Ellis' theological position is at variance with Scripture, one should be willing to consider and use his technique, which is not tied to any particular view. (See Bell, op.cit.,p.6). I generally follow this wise principle throughout this paper.
41. I have found William Kirwan, *Biblical Concepts for Christian Counselling* (G.Rapids, Mich.:Baker, 1984) pp.93-115 particularly helpful, in seeking to work out the implications of the gospel in restoring self-image.
42. I am thankful to Collins, op.cit., pp. 321-2 for this helpful suggestion.
43. It is unfortunate that teachers and parents tend to favour brighter children and this wrong concept has unconsciously remained on students' minds. They are trained to earn their acceptance from others.
44. The idea of a 'theology of failure' was first introduced to me by Gene Thomas in Regent College.
45. My premise is that all loving parents want their children to do well and be successful in society. It is probably ignorance of the negative effects of such comparison tactics which marks their widespread use.

APPENDIX1
AN EXPECTATIONS/SUPPORT MODEL OF FAMILY
(Ephesians 6 : 4)

HIGH EXPECTATIONS
HIGH SUPPORT

AUTHORITATIVE NOT AUTHORITARIAN

A family where there is a rough equivalence between what is expected and how the parents or their surrogates show approval and support.

This kind of family produces well-balanced and "successful" children.

Family discussion is O.K. but once the issue is settled it is mandated. Self-worth is high.

LOW EXPECTATIONS
HIGH SUPPORT

PERMISSIVE PARENTS

The family of the fifties and early sixties. Often a reaction to the High Expectations/Low Support. Permissiveness is the family style.

At first self-worth is high but contact with reality changes that.

There is a tendency to counter culture with rejection of the "religious" values of the parents.

The child of such a family goes through life believing life owes him a living.

HIGH EXPECTATIONS
LOW SUPPORT

SOMETIMES AUTHORITARIAN

A family which makes high demands on their children but rarely positively reinforce "good" behaviour either verbally or with their presence.

Rules are not discussed but are rigorously enforced.

This kind of family tends to produce either depressed or angry children.

The children are programmed with expectations they do not fulfil or fulfil reluctantly. It produces lots of negative self-talk and a strong sense of personal inadequacy. "I never please them."

The most powerful factor here is the support variable.

LOW EXPECTATIONS
LOW SUPPORT

NEGLIGENT PARENTS

The family where neglect is chief feature. The neglect may be philosophical or out of indifference. The sense of self-worth is chronically low.

Children brought up without "attention, affection and approval " have either a total indifference to the socialization process or an insatiable demand for these three items.

North American and Western European societies appear to be producing dangerous and destabilizing quantities of these children.