



WHO AM I?

ROBERT L THOMAS



'A refreshing Biblical approach to the psychological angst of our culture. Much Christian counseling is too influenced by Pagan thinking. Robert Thomas points us back to the Bible for our answers.'

Rev Dr. Paul Blackham
Associate Minister (Theology)
All Souls Church, Langham Place, London

'The Word of God acts like a mirror to reflect accurately the true reality of one's heart and mind—the authentic self (Prov. 27:19; Jas 1:23-25). My esteemed colleague and friend, Dr. Robert L. Thomas, explores the biblical breadth and plumbs the theological depth of what Scripture teaches about the reality of "self." With over 40 years of proven NT scholarship to his credit, Dr. Thomas correctly proposes and then compellingly details his thesis that the NT teaches a death-life paradox as the paradigm by which best to understand and live out a proper Christian self-concept. I warmly commend this work.'

Richard L. Mayhue, Th.D.
Executive Vice President,
The Master's College and Seminary, California





WHO AM I?

THE CHRISTIAN HUNGER
FOR SELF-IDENTITY

ROBERT L THOMAS



MENTOR





Dedicated to the men in my discipleship labs
who, after discussing the principles outlined in this book,
were willing to put those principles into practice



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Introduction

THINKING BIBLICALLY ABOUT ONESELF



Introduction

Who am I? Stated another way, how is a Christian to think of himself/herself? We want to address a subject that you have probably heard about before, but we want to do so from a different perspective. Current cultural emphasis in most of today's western world encourages people to think about themselves in a certain way. Is that way in agreement with what the Bible teaches? A series of New Testament passages tell how Christians should think of themselves. We want to examine those passages, but first we need to emphasize the importance of our minds.

1. Learning how to think

I have spent much of my life trying to teach students how to think. That is not an easy task. People's minds are lazy and they find thinking to be painful. All of us are that way. But God's Word expects us as Christians to use our minds. Peter exhorts us to gird up the loins of our minds (1 Pet. 1:13), and Paul speaks of the need to be transformed through the renewing of our minds (Rom. 12:2) and to be renewed in the spirit of our minds (Eph. 4:23). The Bible also tells the kinds of things we are to think about: 'Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good reputation, if there is any virtue and if anything worthy of praise, let your mind dwell on these things' (Phil. 4:8). Teaching ourselves how to think is the biggest challenge we as Christians face. It is probably the most basic lesson of Christian living. In a world where many attractions are vying for our attention, we need special stimuli to keep our minds on the right subjects.

2. Learning how not to think of ourselves

Having the right thoughts is particularly important when thinking about ourselves. Contemporary experts in psychology are furnishing formulas prescribing how we should conceive of ourselves. Often their answers to this challenge are the exact opposite of what the Bible tells us to think of ourselves. Two modern examples will illustrate.

Worm anthropology. To introduce the first example, let me use myself as an illustration. I want you to know who I am deep inside.



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That will explain why this subject is so important to me. From age 10 to age 22 I was a deeply troubled individual. Those were the years from about the fifth grade until I graduated from college. Throughout that period I lived with a deep-seated guilt. I was worthless and I knew it. Nothing I did was right. I had a sense of responsibility to God that I could never fulfill. Beginning at age ten, I cried myself to sleep every night for many weeks and months. My parents were deeply concerned. My father was at my bedside each night to offer words of encouragement. He took me to an expensive Atlanta psychiatrist whom he could not afford, to try to get help for me. To get my mind off my problems, the psychiatrist recommended an expensive boys' club in an exclusive part of Atlanta that my parents could not afford, but they sent me anyway. The boys' club activities were outstanding, but all those activities only deadened the pain a little. They gave me no lasting relief from my deep depression. As my teen years wore on, I was as active as I could be in the liberal church to which my family belonged. I engaged in athletics and extra-curricular activities in high school. In college I stayed as busy as possible. All this kept my mind off my problem a little, but my deep-seated guilt remained. I viewed myself as a worm because that's what I was.

One branch of Christian psychologists would say I was right on target in my view of self. They would say we need to carry around guilt in everything we do. This 'worm anthropology' approach lies behind such statements as the following that come from this group of Christian counselors: 'Those of us who believe that mankind is fallen have reason to expect that much of what comes between the stimulus and the response will prove to be ugly and twisted.'¹ 'The human personality is a reservoir of the most incredible feelings and ideas' (ibid., 100). 'Sinful thoughts, words and deeds flow forth from this darkened heart automatically and compulsively, as water from a polluted fountain. The human heart is now a reservoir of *unconscious disordered motivation and response*.'² 'Unless we understand sin as rooted in unconscious beliefs and motives and figure out how to expose and deal with

L. J. Crabb, Jr., *Understanding People*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987, 99.
2. R. Lovelace, cited by ibid., 128



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these deep forces within the personality, the church will continue to promote superficial adjustment.³

What worm anthropology does not take into account is the new nature that a believer has in Christ and the opportunity for that new nature to prevail over the flesh through the enablement of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:16-22).

Self-exaltation anthropology. At the other extreme is the dominant advice coming from most Christian psychologists and counselors. That is to have love for myself, to have a high view of my own self-worth, a high self-esteem. Typical of this avalanche of material with which we are being bombarded is a publisher's promotion for a recent Christian book. It reads:

Improved self-esteem leads to a true evaluation and acceptance of others and ourselves. [The author] challenges people to discover their uniqueness and to enjoy who they are. She encourages them to discover their God-designed temperament/type in order to arrive at healthy self-esteem and self-worth. This self-acceptance automatically raises the level of understanding and lowers tension in every arena and age of life, making it 'fun' to celebrate differences rather than feel obligated to think and function according to what another dictates.

[This book] answers our questions regarding the differences in people by using quizzes and real-life examples sprinkled with humor. Readers will painlessly and proudly discover that their personal preferences, though perhaps very different, are normal and 'ok.' Encouragement to join hands with God by using our special gifts to improve our spiritual confidences forms the foundation of *Self-Esteem*.⁴

In support of this position a prominent clergyman in California says that Martin Luther and the other Reformers were mistaken in building their theology around God instead of around Man. He concludes that the essence of man's problem is low self-esteem. He writes, 'I contend and plead for a full-orbed theological system beginning with and based on a solid central core of religious truth—the dignity of man. And let us start with a theology of salvation

3. Ibid., 129.

4. Web-site of Smythe and Helwys Publishing, Inc., <<http://www.helwys.com/books/rward.html>>, June 24, 2001)



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that addresses itself at the outset to man's deepest need, the 'will to self-worth.'⁵ He defines sin as 'any act or thought that robs myself or another human being of his or her self-esteem'.⁶ Here are his words:

I don't think anything has been done in the name of Christ and under the banner of Christianity that has proven more destructive to human personality and, hence, counterproductive to the evangelism enterprise than the often crude, uncouth, and unchristian strategy of attempting to make people aware of their lost and sinful condition.⁷

What self-exaltation anthropology does not take into account is Paul's admonition for a person not to think of himself/herself more highly than he/she ought to think (Rom. 12:3). Scripture observes that self-love is one of the symptoms of a degenerating society in the last days (2 Tim. 3:1-5).

Those are two examples of how not to think of ourselves: worm anthropology and self-exaltation anthropology. Both are wrong paths to follow toward achieving a biblical view of self.

3. Learning how to think accurately about ourselves

How can we think honorable, pure, and lovely things about ourselves as Philippians 4:8 instructs? How can we have thoughts of good reputation that are virtuous and worthy of praise when the object of our thinking is ourselves? The New Testament provides consistent teaching to provide an answer to this question. The string of passages begins with Matthew and goes all the way through Revelation. For too long this teaching in the Bible has not received the attention it should. The current focus on self in our world community requires us to re-examine the Scriptures to find out how we should view ourselves. I have three reasons for thinking this need is so great.

(1) The first one is personal. The personal problems I had when

5. Robert H. Schuller, *Self-Esteem: The New Reformation* [Waco, Tex.: Word, 1982], 150.

6. *ibid.*, 14.

7. Robert Schuller, 'Dr. Schuller Comments' in Letters to the Editor, *Christianity Today* [October 5, 1984]: 12.





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I was young is a good enough reason for me. I was so introspective that I was overcome with guilt in considering my many failings. My biggest need was to receive Christ who died to take away sins and to realize His forgiveness, which I eventually did. But beyond that conversion experience my introspection continued. How was I to think of myself as a Christian? Early in my Christian experience an older Christian shared Romans 12:3 with me, a verse that said I should not think more highly of myself than I ought to think. He used the verse to prove to me that I should think favorably of myself. Even in my brief Christian walk up to that point, that didn't sound like the right interpretation of the verse. I still needed an answer.

(2) Another reason for pursuing the biblical teaching on self-concept is the primacy that Jesus gave the subject in His ministry. For Him it was an indispensable consideration. Jesus made it perfectly clear that this line of thinking is the absolutely necessary first step to becoming His disciple. Without it there can be no lasting discipleship. We will have more to say about this when we look at the five occasions in the Gospels where Jesus taught His disciples and others about how to think of themselves.

(3) A third reason for the need to learn how to think about oneself is the obvious fact that how we think about ourselves determines how we respond to various life-situations. How we respond in turn determines how effective we are in our service for Christ. The Christian way of self-definition will save us from those outlandish moments when we have nothing good to say for ourselves. It will also save us from those preposterous times when we are on top of the world and nothing seems beyond our reach, when our self-esteem is at record-high levels. It will keep us in touch with our Lord and Savior no matter what difficult decision we may face. It will lay the foundation for a lasting commitment to His service. It is the irreplaceable starting point for a life of devotion. The genuineness of Christian commitment depends solely on a Christian view of self. Self-concept is the only lasting basis for dedicating ourselves to God.

It is not enough just to think of ourselves. We must follow the biblical pattern in doing so.



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4. Learning how to think accurately and paradoxically about ourselves

Thinking paradoxically about ourselves is nothing new to Bible students, but it is a new way of expressing familiar biblical teaching. Putting together a string of familiar, similar passages brings us to an inevitable conclusion that has escaped wide attention. The way we are to think of ourselves is a biblical paradox, a contradiction, an incongruity, an oxymoron. The New Testament consistently instructs us to think of ourselves as *living corpses*. We are dead and therefore in a sense corpses, yet we are alive and so we are living. For me to speak of myself as a living corpse is an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms. Secular common sense tells me that a person cannot be dead and alive at the same time. But biblical common sense tells me otherwise. Because a believer in Christ is identified with Christ in His death and identified with Him in His resurrection, he/she is both dead and alive. Christians operate in a realm different from that of non-Christian earthlings and are not subject to usual rules of secular logic. The New Testament teaches unequivocally about the death-life paradox in Christian self-concept.

When He was on earth as a man, the God-man Jesus introduced this paradoxical way of thinking. The Gospel of Matthew tells when He initiated it, and John in the Book of Revelation shows that the paradox will still be valid for Christians in the future, just before Jesus returns to earth. In Matthew 10:39 Jesus said, 'He who has found his life will lose it, and he who has lost his life for My sake will find it.' In that statement He uses 'life' in two different senses, the first to refer to earthly, temporal life and the second—represented by the word 'it' in both parts of the statement—to refer to eternal, spiritual life. In the last half of the verse, losing life in the former sense enables a person to find life in the latter sense if he/she loses the former life for Jesus' sake. One must lose life—that is, he must die—in order to find life. That is incongruous from a human standpoint, but it is a basic fact from the biblical standpoint. In Revelation 12:11 John writes about the faithful saints in the end times: 'They did not love their life even to death.' Here he alludes to Jesus' line of teaching about earthly, temporal life.



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Because of values higher than those of this world, those heroes of the future will readily surrender their lives on this earth in view of the value of obtaining a higher existence for eternity.

Between Matthew and Revelation we have such statements and commands as, 'Reckon yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God' (Rom. 6:11); 'One died for all, therefore all died; and He died for all, that they who live should no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again' (2 Cor. 5:14-15); 'I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me' (Gal. 2:20); 'You have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world. . . . You have been raised up with Christ' (Col. 2:20; 3:1); 'We know that we have passed out of death into life' (1 John 3:14); and a number of others. Such passages illustrate the importance of the biblical self-concept for every situation in life.

How we think has everything to do with how we behave. Specifically this is true in regard to how we think about ourselves. It is of ultimate importance in our relationship with God and with one another. It is of ultimate importance in our service to God and to one another.

The chronological order in which the New Testament presents this subject does not lend itself to an easy apprehension of the concept, so we will put the passages in a sequence that begins with the most direct and succinct statements of how a Christian should think of himself/herself and continue passage by passage in a non-chronological sequence. Sometimes the concept comes by way of a direct command to readers; at other times the experience of Jesus, Paul, or someone else illustrates the concept. Whether the view of self is taught by direct command or by personal illustration will be obvious in each case.

The following discussions show the critical importance of the death-life paradox in a Christian's view of self in various phases of responsibility. They will deal with a Christian's view of self in

- (1) 'Overcoming Sin's Domination' (Rom. 6:1-14)
- (2) 'Gaining Freedom from Law' (Galatians 2:19-20)
- (3) 'Counteracting Wrong Rules' (Colossians 2:20-3:16)



- (4) 'Evaluating Family Ties' (Matthew 10:37-39)
- (5) 'Suffering with Christ' (Matt. 16:24-26 = Mark 8:34-37 = Luke 9:23-25)
- (6) 'Evaluating Earthly Possessions' (Luke 14:26-27)
- (7) 'Responding to This World's Allurements' (Luke 17:32-33)
- (8) 'Fruit-bearing for God' (John 12:24-26)
- (9) 'Fulfilling a Broad Range of Christian Responsibilities' (Romans 12:1-2)
- (10) 'Failing Successfully' (2 Corinthians 4:7-15)
- (11) 'Succeeding Successfully' (Philippians 3:2-16)
- (12) 'Persuading Others to Believe in Christ' (2 Corinthians 5:11-21)
- (13) 'Ridding Oneself of the Hideous Past' (Ephesians 4:17-24)
- (14) 'Achieving Christian Submission' (1 Peter 2:24)
- (15) 'Following God's Will' (1 Peter 4:1-6)
- (16) 'Cultivating Love' (1 John 3:14)
- (17) 'Facing Martyrdom' (Revelation 12:11).

We know how important the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ are to our faith. The biblical self-concept provides a way we can make those two events in His experience a part of our moment-by-moment experience from day to day, that is, by continually contemplating our identification with Him when He died and when He rose from the dead. Let's get on with our survey of this theme.

Scripture translations throughout this work are those done by the author, but should be closely compatible with whatever Bible Version the reader is accustomed to.