

SELF CONCEPT
AND
SPIRITUAL MATURITY

by Margaret Hensley

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When we were missionaries in Indonesia, three couples joined us to discuss a Bible study series called "God's Design for the Family." Dr. Paulus Rahardjo and I worked together to translate the material into the Indonesian language.

The very first lesson in the series introduced the importance of one's self-image in all of his or her relationships, and in particular, in marriage and family. Having found an illustration proposed by Larry Crabb, noted Christian psychologist, very helpful in understanding the process of formation of one's self-image, I drew the illustration using Indonesian terms and explained it during our group's discussion of that first lesson.

Dr. Paulus suggested that I write some commentary and examples to accompany the illustration. My emphasis was the relationship of self-image to spiritual maturity. The result was a small monograph, which has been found useful to both the English and Indonesian readers. Margaret Hensley

INTRODUCTION

Every person has a mental picture of himself, an opinion about who he is, what he is like. This self-image, or self-concept, is extremely important, for what a person thinks about himself determines how he acts and relates to others. A positive self-concept increases his ability to love and to be loved. He can relate to others in an open, honest, truly loving manner, and can serve them unhindered by his own insecurities and needs. He is not shackled by the past, but realizing he can change, he moves toward the full purpose God has for his life, making his own unique contributions and expressing his own creative ability. He feels worthwhile and good about himself. When problems arise, he can put himself to the task of solving them. His mind is not divided between coping with his own anxieties and coping with the problem at hand.

While we may at times experience the results of a positive self-concept, this may be short-lived. All too often we feel alone, unloved or unaccepted. We feel inferior, insecure, or worry about our ability to cope with the inevitable difficulties of life. We become apprehensive about expressing our opinions and ideas. We are hesitant to be open with others, or are overly sensitive to criticism. Anger, resentment, bitterness, anxiety, and depression are symptoms of a negative self-image, or one based on a shaky foundation. Feeling unsure about ourselves, we may be reluctant to attempt to do what we know is God's leading. Or we may work to the point of exhaustion to prove ourselves, often in tasks that do not have lasting significance.

A person's attitudes, behavior, and relationships with others are a measure of his spiritual maturity. These same characteristics reflect his self-concept. What then is the relationship between self-concept and spiritual maturity? How can these correlations be used to grow in Christian character? These are some areas related to self-concept that we want to explore, with a view to allowing God to use this understanding to bring us to spiritual maturity, making us more like Jesus Christ.

1. THE MODEL

In order to use the correlations between self-concept and spiritual maturity to grow in Christian character, we need to understand how we came to see ourselves as we do. Through understanding the process of the formation of self-concept and its effect on our behavior and emotions, we can more easily pinpoint the obstacles to our spiritual maturity and allow the Spirit of God through the Scriptures to replace that obstacle with a means of spiritual growth.

Figure A illustrates the process of the formation of the self-concept, with its resultant impact on behavior and emotions.

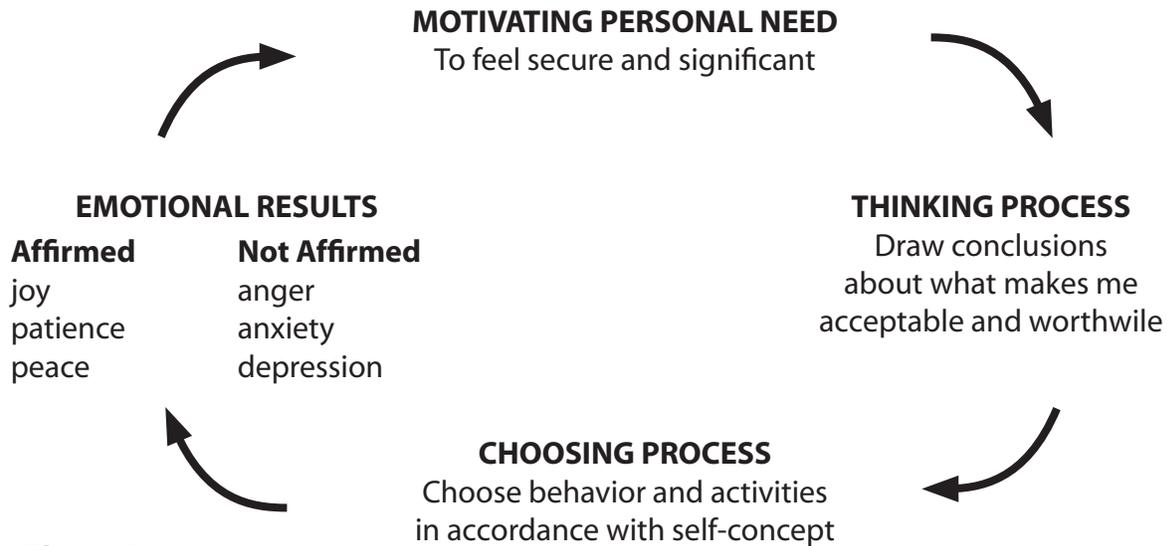


Figure A

Every person has been created with a need to feel secure and significant; that is, to view himself as accepted, worthwhile, and competent. This is his **MOTIVATING PERSONAL NEED**. From infancy he seeks to know what makes him accepted and significant so that that need can be fulfilled. Through this **THINKING PROCESS** he forms conclusions about what he is like. This is called his self-image or self-concept.

Based on this concept of himself, each person then conforms his behavior and activities (**CHOOSING PROCESS**) to those which he believes will generate a sense of security and significance. The **EMOTIONAL RESULTS** of positive response to his words and actions are positive feelings such as happiness and feeling loved and confident. On the other hand, negative emotions such as anger and anxiety arise if he considers that his sense of security and significance is being threatened.

Because circumstances of life are constantly changing, the need for security and significance in those varying situations again bring the individual back to the thinking process in which he evaluates what he thinks is necessary to fulfill that

need in his new circumstance and then chooses behavior in accordance with that evaluation.

Let us now examine each of the steps in the above illustration in detail.

2. FORMATION OF SELF-CONCEPT

MOTIVATING PERSONAL NEED

We are all born with a God-created need to feel secure and significant. We **must** feel loved, accepted and needed by people important to us. We **must** feel cared for and enjoyed. We **must** feel that we are worthwhile, that we are proper and good, that people pay attention to us, that we can feel forgiven and can forgive ourselves. We fervently want the security that someone who sees us exactly as we are still accepts us.

We also **must** have a feeling of competency, of being able to carry out our daily tasks and to cope with the uncertainties of life, and that our life has purpose. We want to leave a mark on our world, a real and enduring difference that matters.

Those inborn needs of security and significance must be met. No individual can tolerate existence without having these needs met. Every person is inwardly driven to seek out ways to insure that he does feel accepted, worthwhile, and competent. This search begins at the time of birth.

“You’re nothing but a coward with a big mouth,” taunted the companions of the youth. Angered and humiliated, the young man climbed into a taxi and headed for an unknown destination. Upon reaching that place, instead of paying the fare, he stabbed and killed the driver and put the body into the back seat of the taxi. He then drove the taxi to a site frequented by his companions and showed them the evidence, trying to dispel their notions that he was a coward. His attempt to eliminate the intolerable feeling of rejection and failure led to a tragic act that left the driver’s family without its breadwinner and put the youth behind bars.

Most of us would not resort to such drastic measures to protect our feelings of security and significance. But how many of us sulk when we are not praised or recognized for an accomplishment or a good deed? How many of us choose to turn the other way rather than rebuke a Christian brother who is sinning? Do we become angry or depressed if those to whom we are ministering do not seem to be responding to our teaching? Are we immersed in a whirlwind of activities to the neglect of the “invisible” activity of Bible study and prayer? These tendencies also may reflect an effort to protect a positive concept of ourselves.

THINKING PROCESS

As an infant, each individual begins his quest to feel secure and significant by receiving and evaluating the actions and reactions of his parents toward him. He seems to be able to distinguish between being complimented or being scolded. He identifies what he regards as love or disapproval. If he senses love and acceptance, he begins to develop positive feelings about himself; disapproval arouses negative

feelings about his worthiness as a person. As he continues to grow, he continually adds to his store of memories and evaluations of others' reactions toward him in three basic areas:

1. **Appearance** - How well do I look?
2. **Performance** - How well did I do?
3. **Status** - How important am I?

As the child grows, he observes whether others notice or ignore him, include or exclude him, smile or frown, like and approve or dislike and disapprove, compliment or criticize, accept or reject him. He subconsciously asks himself: "How do they think I look?", "Are they proud to be with me?", "Were they impressed by what I did?", "Was I better than others?", "Do they respect me?", "Am I important to them?" Through these evaluations he forms conclusions about what he thinks other people think about him in these areas. These opinions accumulate in his unconscious mind, forming his view of himself, that is, his self-image or self-concept. Through this process he forms conclusions about what he thinks other people find acceptable, worthwhile, enjoyable, and praiseworthy in him and thus will fulfill his basic personal need to feel secure and significant.

While a person continues to evaluate and adjust his self-concept throughout his life in light of more recent experiences, the basic concept of self is formed during the first five years of life. It would seem, then, that we are merely victims of our parents and our environment in childhood. Yet we are also agents, because as creatures born in sin, from the beginning we chose to seek ways to handle our own world with our own resources, rather than depending on our Creator. We carefully began to lay out strategies to minimize the inevitable pain of insecurity and insignificance resulting from that independence.

Tim Hansel, a well-known Christian author, was an outdoor enthusiast who derived much pleasure, physical as well as spiritual, from hiking and mountain climbing. The exhilaration of strenuous physical exertion and accomplishment heightened his enjoyment of the Presence of God in his wilderness adventures. He founded Summit Expedition, a wilderness and mountaineering ministry which enabled others to join in that excitement of growing in their knowledge of the Lord through outings to remote and difficult-to-reach locations.

A few years later, while on a climbing expedition, Tim fell into a crevasse, resulting in severe spinal injuries. His process of dealing with his injuries followed that same course that others experience in any kind of loss: denial that it is really happening or is so serious, bargaining with God, anger and depression. Never again would he be able to conquer a mountain height. His body would be plagued with continual pain and quick fatigue. Finally he came to the point of accepting his situation, and he asked the Lord to teach him to live in new ways, to teach him His ways in the midst of his sufferings.

Through the months that followed, Tim kept a journal of the lessons he was learning from God. One day he wrote this entry: "For so long my self-image

depended on my physical strength and fitness.” At a later date he entered this succinct conclusion in his journal:

“If your security is based on something that can be taken away from you, you will constantly be on a false edge of security.”

Tim Hansel had formed a basis for feeling good about himself—being physically fit and strong—and when it was suddenly gone, he realized the precarious foundation he had chosen for his self-concept.

3. IMPACT OF SELF-CONCEPT ON BEHAVIOR AND EMOTIONS

CHOOSING PROCESS

Because every individual must feel secure and significant, and because through the process described above he has developed certain conclusions about what will cause him to feel loved and admired by others, he then chooses activities and behavior that will assure the maintenance of these feelings. Using the bases of appearance, performance, and status, he seeks to earn love and approval by fulfilling the expectations of others and thus approaches life with “How do others think I should act or react?” His life is shaped by what he thinks others expect of him, and then deep down he hates himself because of this lack of integrity.

If his feeling of being accepted and significant is based on appearance, then he must always be attractive. A child who is constantly praised for being cute or pretty may, as an adult, continue to seek the admiration of others through giving undue attention to his or her appearance. As a woman she may overspend on keeping up with the latest fashions or expensive accessories. Being “caught” unprepared can shatter her self-confidence, resulting in a gruff greeting to the person who arrived before expected. A sad outcome of dependence on appearance for feeling good about oneself is the grouchy, unconfident, depressed older person, after the natural results of ageing have taken their irreversible toll on his appearance.

A self-concept bolstered by **performance** will cause a person to be driven to greater and greater degrees of skill and perfection. He will be unwilling to attempt something that has the possibility of failure. The anxiety that arises when he contemplates an undertaking that might fail will cause him to choose against that undertaking. He thus may choose what will enforce his security and significance rather than what may be best for other people or for the kingdom of God. He may choose a sinful solution such as lying or deceit rather than admit to failure or poor performance.

Status as a basis for feeling accepted and significant can result in a drive to be the top one, regardless of those who are hurt as he climbs the ladder of success. He will be more concerned with how the people he associates with affect his status in the eyes of others, rather than whom he needs to serve. He may gossip and reveal

others' secrets because it gives him a feeling of importance to be the source of such privileged information. Or he may choose activities that will result in public acclaim, rather than serve behind the scenes where he will receive no recognition.

The importance of status in the Indonesian culture is often evident. It seems as if everyone must have someone to boss around. If two daily laborers are assigned to a task, one does the "bossing," the other does the hard work. A university student may be humble and submissive as long as he is still pursuing his degree, but as soon as he graduates, his status in society is elevated. He expects respect and may look down on others. If his leadership is not obeyed, he may become angry or depressed and feel like a failure, because his status is not providing the success he sought to bolster his sense of significance.

In all these choices of behavior, motivated by what the person thinks will cause him to feel worthwhile and loved, his attention is focused on self and how much he is impressing the other person. He is not thinking about the other person's needs and value as a person.

According to Dr. Maxwell Maltz, 90% of us suffer from feelings of inferiority. We feel dumb, that we don't do as well as we should. We feel like failures, that we are incapable. We feel that no one likes us or really wants to be our friend. The results can be much loss in the area of personal relationships as well as in service to others.

Because of the pain of feeling insecure or insignificant, we rely on various protective behaviors to preserve whatever positive feelings we can muster up. We may be unwilling to share deep feelings, or respond with anger when our feelings are hurt. We may change the subject when the conversation begins to be threatening. We may clam up in order to avoid rejection or criticism. Or we may keep ourselves so busy with work, social engagements, church activities, or endless chatter that no deep sharing is possible.

As a result of our feelings of insecurity or insignificance, we may seek to overemphasize our strengths and will not admit to normal weaknesses and need for dependence. Or we may actually capitalize on our weaknesses in order to gain sympathy from others and play on their willingness to cater to our whims. In such cases our strengths are not exercised for the good of others. Or we may seek to preserve our present self-concept by withdrawing and becoming evasive, so that nothing will disturb or threaten whatever positive feelings we have about ourselves. We become uninvolved and indifferent and keep out of touch with others.

Jane's father was jovial, always happy and good-natured. There were lots of good times together as Jane grew up. Yet her father was never deeply involved with her. Her attempts to discuss with him matters of importance to her were brushed aside or laughed away. Jane came to see herself as a person with nothing inside worth a serious response. Because it was so painful to present her real self to someone and then be treated lightly, she concluded that the most effective way to avoid

that pain was to hide from view who she really was, her feelings, her opinions, her ideas. Jane was known as a very shy young woman.

On the other hand we may compare ourselves with others and try to maintain a self-image that is too high. We call attention to our successes and importance. We do what seems right to us—we do not need laws or someone to tell us what to do. We feel superior to others and tear down other people and situations in order to maintain our lofty position. We allow, or seek to give, false impressions in order that our position of superiority is not threatened. While such a person may appear to have a positive self-concept, in actuality he may be suffering from an insecure, negative view of himself.

Two incidents in Scripture reveal the disastrous results of a fear of man because of a low self-image. In Numbers 13, the spies sent into the promised land came back with a discouraging report about the inhabitants of the land. Their attitude, "We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them," led to the disobedience of the whole nation of Israel, who were sentenced by God to forty years of wandering in the wilderness.

In 1 Samuel 10:21-23, when Saul was to be anointed king of Israel, he hid himself. Samuel referred to him as being "small in his own eyes" (1 Sam. 15:17). Later on, after becoming king, Saul gave in to the desires of the people and disobeyed the Lord, because he "feared the people" (1 Sam. 15:24). His desire to be accepted led to a choice that resulted in his loss of the kingship.

The characteristics of behavior as described in the preceding paragraphs, which all of us exhibit in our lives, indicate a self-concept that is not accurate or is based on shaky premises. We make wrong choices of behavior because of our wrong assumptions about what will make us feel accepted, worthwhile, and competent. These wrong choices then lead to painful and threatening emotions that counteract the very goal we were trying to reach: feeling good about ourselves.

EMOTIONAL RESULTS

In our quest to maintain a positive feeling about ourselves based on our appearance, performance, and status, from time to time we reach that goal through the activity or behavior we have chosen. Others are happy with what we have done; they are impressed; they compliment us on our appearance. Naturally this tends to reinforce the assumption upon which we based that choice of behavior. We feel happy, content, confident, communicative. Nevertheless such feelings are short-lived. We become fearful of losing that positive feeling. The resulting anxiety causes us to focus our attention on ourselves, leaving us insensitive to the feelings of others. We become unrealistic and unreasonable, and thus we are alienated from the very sources of our feeling accepted and important.

If as a result of our chosen behavior other people seem to be indifferent or to disapprove, our feelings of security and significance are in fact threatened instead of reinforced. Our goal of seeking affirmation of our worthwhileness as a person

has been blocked, so we become angry at the person or circumstance that blocked that goal. The alienation caused by that anger results in a loss of the feeling of belongingness. A feeling of humiliation leading to anger indicates a loss of feeling adequate and competent. We may blame others for our failure.

Another reaction is to feel guilty, to blame ourselves for the failure that led to our loss of feeling good about ourselves. We may then try to force ourselves to change, but we feel less worthwhile in the process. Or we may give up and exhibit symptoms of depression. Our goal of security and significance seems unreachable, because we consider ourselves to be inadequate.

To summarize then, through our evaluation of the reactions of others toward us, we form assumptions as to what we think will result in the fulfillment of our basic need to be secure and significant. On the basis of those assumptions, we choose activities and behavior to reach that goal. Reaching the goal brings confidence and contentment, but these feelings are only temporary. They are quickly replaced by

1. Anxiety, because of the uncertainty of maintaining that positive feeling about ourselves;
2. Anger, if our goal is blocked; or
3. Depression, when our goal seems unreachable.

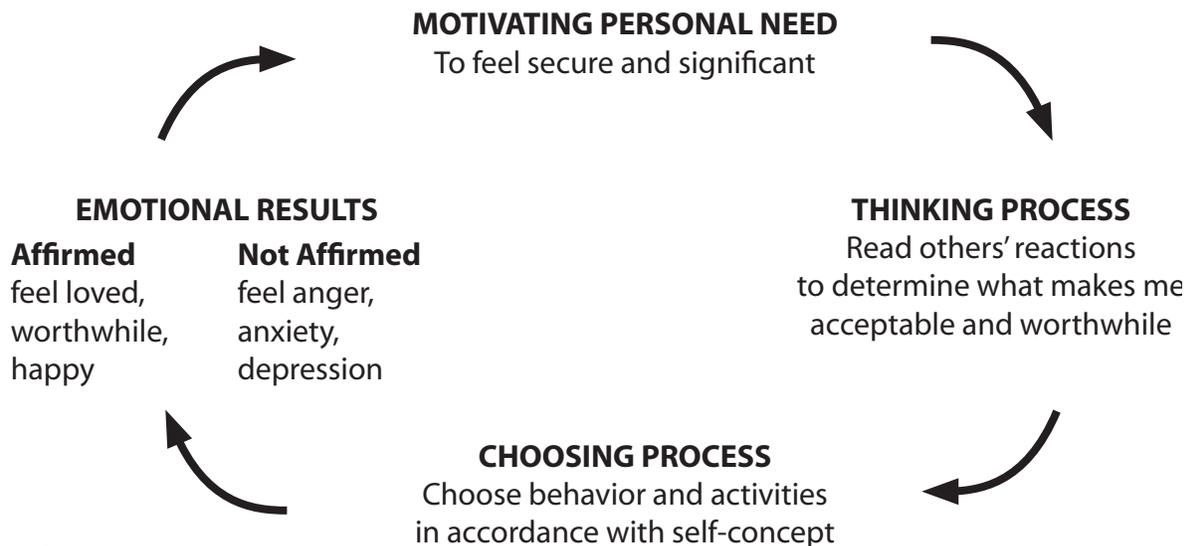


Figure B

Based on the process illustrated by Figure A on page 2, Figure B page summarizes the results of seeking a self-image based on the reactions of people.

Whereas we may not be consciously aware of the evaluation process and the reasons for our chosen behavior, we are usually cognizant of the emotions which we experience. We seek ways to maintain the positive emotions of happiness and peace. The thrust of advertising today reflects the drive in man to be comfortable, to have status, and to find pleasure.

When we experience negative emotions, we want to be rid of them, and may use various methods to attempt to deal with them, such as to deny that they exist or to try to cover them up, to ourselves as well as to others. When anger and depression threaten to overwhelm us, rather than turning to the only true source of security and significance, we look for a substitute. The list is endless: therapy, pills, zeal for a new cause, new forms of pleasure, personal retreat and meditation, even suicide. We try whatever we think will alleviate the pain and uncomfortable emotions we are experiencing.

We have seen that the self-concept has a marked effect on our behavior and our emotions. The effect is not always desirable. What is the problem?

God Himself created us with the need to feel secure and significant, and from birth we endeavor to find fulfillment of those needs. As an all-wise and loving God, He did not make a mistake in creating those needs within us. The problem does not originate with the **MOTIVATING PERSONAL NEED**.

Through the **THINKING PROCESS** we evaluate the reactions of others and draw conclusions about what we think we are like, thus forming what we are calling the self-concept. But is this self-concept accurate? Can these needs of being loved and making an impact be fulfilled through the process described? The answer to both questions is “No.” Why?

4. THE INACCURACY OF THE SELF-CONCEPT

UNRELIABLE MIRRORS

The actions and reactions of other people are the “mirror” in which we seek to find what we are really like. Like the mirror in the fun house at the carnival, the reflection is a distorted picture of the reality. Likewise the inherent characteristics of man make it impossible for him to be an accurate mirror by which to find our true self.

In order to be an accurate mirror, people must always love us unconditionally—an impossibility, because unconditional love...

1. **Is always available.** Although a young mother may try to meet the demands of a crying infant as quickly as possible, it is impossible for her always to be available immediately. To the infant’s immature mind, the delay may be interpreted as lack of love and concern. As a child grows, the inevitable inability or unwillingness of others to immediately gratify his needs and wants may again be interpreted by his immature and inexperienced mind as lack of love. Regardless of how loving parents may be, they cannot meet the child’s idealistic demands for perfection.
2. **Never changes.** The reactions of the people we “read” vary with the circumstances they themselves are experiencing. What we may read as a negative reaction on their part may only reflect their own anxiety or distracted state of mind, and be completely unrelated to what they are thinking about us.

3. **Is always fair and honest.** Man with his finite wisdom and understanding cannot always evaluate situations clearly and render a fair and honest judgment. Because man can only see the outside, not the heart and motivation of another individual, he cannot evaluate with 100% accuracy.
4. **Is always for our good.** Because of the efforts of our “mirror” to maintain a positive image of himself, he does not, in actuality, always act for the good of others. Nor could he, for his finite wisdom cannot enable him to know what is best for all concerned, or what is best in light of the future.
5. **Cannot be manipulated.** By certain words or actions, we know that we can manipulate others to give the kind of positive affirmation of our self-image which we are seeking. We call it “fishing for a compliment.” Yet even when we receive such affirmation we cannot believe it, because we have presented ourselves only in the most flattering light. We put others in a position where because of politeness they could not refuse to give us a compliment. The compliment then not only is useless to bolster our self-image, but we are angry with ourselves for being deceitful! A “mirror” that is reliable must be one that cannot be manipulated.

SUBJECTIVE INTERPRETATION

The adult as well as the growing child forms and verifies his self-concept mostly through interpersonal relationships. His self-image is based, not on what others actually think, but on what he thinks they think of him. His perception of what others say and do is conditioned by his own mental attitude, thus perpetuating and reinforcing the concept he already has formed.

For example, if he already has a poor view of himself, he does not believe that the positive reaction of his mirror is genuine. If he considers himself to be a failure, then a loving suggestion is received as criticism and as proof that he is indeed a failure.

FALSE IDEAL

We form a mental image of what we think we want or ought to be, the “ideal” self we believe will make us happy if we can only attain it. It becomes the standard by which we judge ourselves and our performances. But sin has interfered with clear thinking (Rom. 1:21) and Satan has taught all of us lies about what is ideal. Even our ideal constantly changes, depending on the people we are with.

At the heart of the formation of our inaccurate self-concept is our determination to remain independent of God and still make life work. The Bible says we have a darkened mind; we hold views and ideas that we may consciously disown. Our heart is deceitful, full of motives hidden even to ourselves.

Because our self-concept is inaccurate and based on a shaky foundation, we can never completely resolve our feelings of separation, isolation, and aloneness. We are never totally secure in our sense of being somebody. We can never get away from the possibility of losing our sense of self-esteem. We seek to verify to

ourselves that we are not a nobody. We endeavor to maintain a level of contact that allows others to touch us in ways that feel good, but enough distance that ensures invulnerability to potential hurt, thus putting a boundary the extent of our involvement with others.

Where can we find a self-concept that is accurate and stable, one that can be relied upon and thus free us from the constant effort to reaffirm our worth? Where can we find the sense of security and significance that is unchanging and will enable us to truly serve others as the Lord would have us to do?

5. A STABLE FOUNDATION FOR AN ACCURATE SELF-CONCEPT

THE PERFECT MIRROR

Our old self-concept, as we have said, is based on a mirror which was faulty: the reactions of other people. God provides for us Himself and His Word as a mirror which is perfect. His character stands in contrast to those inherent weaknesses of imperfect human mirrors. He is love, and His love is unconditional, as defined by the previous criteria.

1. He is always available.

“My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth. He will not let your foot slip—he who watches over you will not slumber...The Lord will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore.” (Ps. 121:2,3,8)

2. He never changes.

“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.” (Heb. 13:8)

3. He is always fair and honest.

“He is the Rock, his works are perfect. and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he.” (Deut. 32:4)

“God is not man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should change his mind.” (Num. 23:19)

4. He always acts for our good.

“We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” (Rom. 8:28)

5. He cannot be manipulated.

“...the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like the shifting shadows.” (James 1:17)

“He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his hand or say to him: ‘What have you done?’”
(Dan. 4:35)

Therefore we have a source of unconditional love. His love cannot be earned, and therefore it cannot be lost. Through Jeremiah, the prophet, God said, “I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with loving-kindness.” (Jer. 31:3) Because of His unconditional love He provides us with a mirror in which we can see an accurate picture of ourselves.

COMPLETELY OBJECTIVE

God, Who knows the end from the beginning and Who perceives the thoughts of man even before they are formed, accurately evaluates all things. He will not later discover something that will cause Him to change His opinion. His perception of us is objective, not subject to new revelations or changing situations or a need to prove to Himself His own worth. He is completely honest, so what He says about us is always true. Thus through the Word of God we find an objective picture of who we really are, instead of the subjective interpretation we have formed.

THE PERFECT IDEAL

The ideal by which we measured our self-acceptance was formed by our assumptions about what we thought was approved by others. 2 Cor. 10:12 states that “when they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are not wise.”

Our ideal must be perfect and unchanging. Jesus Christ was the perfect man, for in Him all the fullness of perfect Deity lived in bodily form (Col. 2:9). He then provides for us the only true Ideal by which we should measure ourselves.

But, you may say, the Bible does not paint a very pretty picture of who I am. It shows me as tiny in importance, “like a grasshopper” in His sight (Is. 40:15,22). I am transient (Jas. 4:14). I am exceedingly sinful (Jer. 17:9), incapable of doing what is right; indeed my righteous deeds are called “filthy rags” (Is. 64:6). I am guilty and flawed. I repeatedly make mistakes and fail in what I attempt to do. Does that not make me feel even less good about myself, totally unaccepted and insignificant? Is it not a cruel trick for God to have created me with that basic need to feel accepted, worthwhile, and competent, knowing all the while that I will fail miserably?

Yes, it would be a cruel trick, if God had not also provided the perfect solution for my need. He did indeed create us with the need for security and significance, knowing that we could never find it in ourselves or in our relationships with others. His intention is that He Himself fulfill that need.

THE MOTIVATING PERSONAL NEED FULFILLED

The longings of man to feel secure and significant were created by God Himself and therefore are legitimate. Knowing that we can never find satisfaction of these longings in ourselves, He has provided fulfillment of them in Jesus Christ.

1. **Security** - God says that in Christ I am His child (John 1:12), a citizen of His kingdom (Eph. 2:19), His friend (John 15:14,15). He knows all about me, yet He has accepted me (Rom. 15:7). Because He knows all about me from the beginning to the end (Ps. 139:1-5), there will be no new discovery about me that will cause Him to reject me; I am secure in Christ (Rom. 8:38,39). He doesn't hide from me the truth about my sinfulness and my waywardness, but He provides forgiveness and acceptance.
2. **Significance** - God has stated as a matter of fact that we can do nothing of ourselves (John 15:5), that all our acts of righteousness are as filthy rags, that we cannot direct my own life in the way that is right (Is. 53:6). Yet He has given us the Holy Spirit as our comforter, our guide, our source of strength, our protector. Because God is above all circumstances, nothing that touches our lives is beyond His sovereign control. Therefore, in Jesus Christ, we are competent to cope with whatever comes into our lives (Phil. 4:13). He has provided everything we need for life and godliness (2 Pet. 1:3).

God has a purpose for our life, and because He is eternal, our life therefore has eternal significance. He formed us in our mother's womb; our frame was not in Him. He has written in His book all the days ordained for us, before one of them came to be (Ps. 139:13,15,16). And we have the assurance that "The Lord will fulfill his purpose for me." (Ps. 138:8).

No longer do we need to seek our self-identity through other people's reactions concerning our appearance, our performance, and our status. Our appearance, created specifically and especially by God Himself, is a frame in which to display His love and sufficiency. Our performance is now an outworking of His new life in us, a way of giving love without using it to support our identity. Our status is important only as it gives opportunity to glorify God and serve others.

Freed now to enter into other people's lives with neither self-protection nor defensiveness, we can move toward, not away from involvement. The pain of disappointment and conflict that inevitably occurs in deep involvement among fallen people does not cause us to back away behind walls of appropriateness (doing what is expected) or spiritual retreat (the excuse, "I'll pray about it.").

To know who we truly are, we need only to look at what God says about us in His Word. And more importantly, we need to lay hold of the truth that we are secure in His love and that our life is significant.

How can I go about appropriating this basis for a new self-image in Christ?

6. REMOLDING OUR SELF-CONCEPT

As a Christian we have a choice: 1) we can continue with a conditional or relative self-concept, built on our perception of us, and thus be forced to choose behavior that we hope will result in positive feelings about ourselves, or 2) we can develop an absolute and accurate self-concept, based on the grace of the absolute and unchanging God of the universe, which will free us to do the will of God in spite of disapproval and misunderstanding.

We must keep in mind, however, that a believer who continues to base his self-worth on the opinion of other people can never grow to maturity in Christian character and service. On the other hand, a positive regard for self, based on Scriptural truths, enables him to better glorify God with his life.

Christian maturity is often defined in terms of a person's knowledge of the Scriptures, his habits and his skills in spiritual activities. It may be measured by his ability to challenge, impress, and stimulate others.

Ephesians 4:11-16 defines maturity as "attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ." Whereas the spiritual infant is tossed to and fro by the opinions and teachings of man, the spiritually mature person is growing into the fullness of Christ. The whole body of Christ then grows as each part fulfills its particular function.

In Philippians 3:13-15, the apostle Paul describes the attitude of the spiritually mature Christian as forgetting the past and pressing ahead to attain what God has for him in Christ. He forsakes his old ways, based on the opinions and teachings of man, which leave him vulnerable to every change. In its place he presses ahead to appropriate the fullness of what God has for him. As he does so, he grows into the likeness of Jesus Christ, toward the "whole measure of the fullness of Christ."

In John 13:34,35 Jesus establishes the characteristic that distinguishes his disciples: love. An examination of Scripture to see what this love is really like reveals that this is not just a warm smile, full-of-compliments and pat-on-the-back sort of affection, but a self-sacrificing, others-centered heart attitude. It is a love that can only result when we can relate to others without self-protection, when we can truly "in humility consider others better than [ourselves]" (Phil. 2:3). A person moving toward spiritual maturity must be committed to the abandonment of self-protection and to involvement with others in whatever fashion will encourage them to move toward God.

ROMANS 12

Romans 12 summarizes God's solution to the remolding of our self-concept, which in turn frees us to move toward spiritual maturity:

"Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—which is your spiritual worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of

this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: 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. Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.

We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully."

Let us look at these verses in greater detail.

"Offer your bodies as living sacrifices"

A sacrifice has no plans of its own; it is yielded to the desires and purposes of the one who receives it. The Christian who desires to cooperate with God in the remolding of his self-concept already realizes his spiritual bankruptcy. He admits that his life from birth has been committed to solving his problems and meeting his basic needs through means that are independent of God. He has had confident belief in himself to make life work without God. But now he repents of this admitted independency and rebellious unbelief in God and acknowledges that "apart from [the Lord he] can do nothing." (John 15:5) He submits himself to dependency upon God alone. So he offers himself to God as a living sacrifice, as a living being who desires to forsake his own schemes and plans and become what God wants him to be.

"Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world."

Living as a sacrifice presented to God is in direct contrast to the pattern of this world. The world is committed to the pursuit of peace, comfortable emotions, purpose in life, and contentment through such means as the pursuit of pleasure, material possessions, power, status, accomplishment, the praise of others, and so on. Born with the sinful predisposition to live apart from dependence on God, man seeks to fulfill his every need by his own efforts. His thoughts and actions of necessity are centered on himself and how to fulfill his needs. His concept of who he is and how his needs can be met are all based on the world and its pattern of thinking and doing.

The Christian moving toward spiritual maturity is to forsake the pattern of the world. He is to be committed to pursuing the kingdom of God and His righteousness. Even this new direction cannot be pursued by his own effort,

but he must depend on the Lord for every step. He repents of his old method of evaluating life and seeks God's true way.

"Be transformed by the renewing of your mind."

As a living sacrifice, we still have the ability to think. This verse tells us that our thinking needs to be renewed, so that we are no longer conformed to the pattern of this world. We are to have a new way of thinking, based on the absolute truth of God's character and His Word. (Eph. 4:23,24) We are to think about what is right, pure, excellent and praiseworthy. (Phil. 4:8)

We have seen in this study that our behavior and choices are based on assumptions we have made about what makes us acceptable and worthwhile as individuals. But this **THINKING PROCESS** is faulty, and sinful behavior and attitudes have resulted. We have interpreted our world in a fashion that encouraged and nurtured our commitment to self-reliance. But now that thinking needs to be renewed. It needs to shift from beliefs that preserve independence to beliefs that require dependence on what God has said to be true, rather than what we ourselves have concluded is accurate.

Thus real change is far more than altering sinful behavior patterns. The Holy Spirit must change our essential thinking. Our deceitful heart is full of motives hidden even to ourselves, and our darkened minds hold ideas which we would consciously disown. Surrender to the work of the Spirit and prayer for this change in our inner being are essential to the renewal of our thinking. "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting." (Ps. 139:23,24)

The Word of God is also essential to the renewal of our minds. It is "living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart." (Heb. 4:12) The Scriptures reveal our erroneous thinking and enlighten us with a view of ourselves that is true and accurate. They provide us with a knowledge of God's unconditional love that provides fulfillment of our basic need for acceptance and significance.

"Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is."

When our **THINKING PROCESS** is based on the truth of God's Word, and our assurance of being loved and worthwhile is based on His unchanging character rather than on the undependable reactions and opinions of others, we can more clearly discern what God's will is.

For example, when we tried to fulfill our need for feeling worthwhile by being successful in what we accomplished, we would experience anxiety when we considered undertaking a task at which we might fail. We might then interpret that anxiety as a lack of peace and conclude on the basis of that lack of peace that pursuing that task was not God's will for us.

If, however, we recognize through the Scriptures that God's view of success is different from ours, and our obedience is more important to Him than our successful performance, then we can choose His will rather than another path that we feel forced to choose lest our sense of security or significance be threatened.

Thus the basis for the **CHOOSING PROCESS** has been affected and corrected by the renewing of our mind. There is still a choice to be made, whether to follow the known will of God or not, but that choice no longer needs to be based on our effort to maintain feelings of security and significance.

"Think of yourself with sober judgment."

In the Greek text, the word translated here as "sober" is the term *sophrones*. This term is in other verses variously translated "right mind" (Luke 8:35 and 2 Cor. 5: 13), "clear-minded" (1 Pet. 4:7), and "self-controlled" (Tit. 2:6,12). Thus *sophrones* implies clear, accurate thinking based on truth. It also includes the concept of self-control, that is, self-restraint that governs passions and desires, enabling behavior to be conformed to the mind of Christ.

In application to our discussion here, we are to exercise control of our thoughts, basing them on the truth and accuracy of God's Word. In the words of 2 Corinthians 10:5, we are to "take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ." Thus the words above, to "think of yourself with sober judgment" form a command, and a command is something to be obeyed. If we choose to continue to let our thinking be conformed to the pattern of the world's thinking, we are being disobedient to the Lord. At the beginning of this section we said that the Christian is faced with the choice of continuing to base his self-concept on the world's pattern of trusting the opinions of other people, or of developing an accurate self-concept based on the grace of God and the truth of His Word. That choice then basically becomes one of obedience or disobedience to the Lord.

"In accordance with the measure of faith God has given you."

Faith and trust are interchangeable in meaning. A real Christian is by definition a person who has placed his trust in the truth of God's promises to forgive his sins through Jesus Christ. These promises are only valid if God's character can also be trusted; that is, that He will not change His mind or renege on His promises. Thus anyone who belongs to Christ already possesses a great measure of faith. He already believes that what God has said is true and will not fail to be fulfilled.

It is with this same measure of faith that we are to think clearly about who we are. Just as we rest our trust on God's Word concerning our salvation, we also are to rely on what God says regarding what we are to think about ourselves. God has already given us a measure of faith that is sufficient for the renewing of our mind and transformation of our lives - lives that He wants to be filled with joy, peace, love, humility, patience, and kindness toward others emanating from pure motives of the heart.

“In Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.”

After the command to the Roman Christians that they must be clear-minded in their evaluation of themselves, Paul continues with the reminder that they belong to Christ. God has placed them into the large fellowship of believers known as the body of Christ. Nothing can separate them from the love that has placed them there. They are safe. They have been accepted by God Himself. (Rom. 15:7)

Thus one aspect of thinking of ourselves with “sober judgment” is to recognize that we belong to something and Someone from which we cannot be separated. Our need to feel accepted and secure is fulfilled because of the relationship with Christ which God has given to us through His unconditional love.

“We have different gifts, according to the grace given us.”

This passage has reminded us that we are members of the body of Christ, and that like our physical body, the members have different functions. In 1 Peter 4:10 we read that “each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God’s grace in its various forms.”

The implications are two-fold. As a member of Christ’s body, we each have a specific function. The Lord Himself has given us that function, and thus our life has significance. He also has given us gifts. Through these gifts we have the ability to carry out the function that he has assigned to us. He has made us competent. (2 Cor. 3:5) With Christ as the Head of His body, as each member does its work, the whole body grows and builds itself up in love. (Eph. 4:16)

Thus by sober judgment a maturing Christian not only recognizes his security and acceptance in Christ, but also the significance of this life. He has a purpose that is of eternal value, and in Christ he is competent to fulfill that purpose. Figure C summarizes the cycle of behavior and emotions resulting from a self-concept based on the truths of God’s Word.

Through regular intake of the Word and fellowship with the Lord through prayer, the growing Christian is continually assured that his **MOTIVATING PERSONAL NEED** of feeling secure and significant are completely met in Jesus Christ. His **THINKING PROCESS** and his self-concept increasingly are based on God’s truths, replacing his dependence on the opinions of others. Fellowship with other growing Christians who are learning to relate accurately with others reinforces the process.

With his self-concept becoming increasingly based on the truths of God’s Word, the growing Christian is able to discern the will of God more accurately and becomes better able to **CHOOSE** behavior and activities in accordance with that will, thus purifying his service to the Lord. His **RESULTING EMOTIONS** are joy and peace instead of anxiety, patience and love instead of anger, faith and hope instead of guilt and depression. The fruit of the Holy Spirit become more evident in his life. He is becoming more spiritually mature. He is becoming more like Jesus.

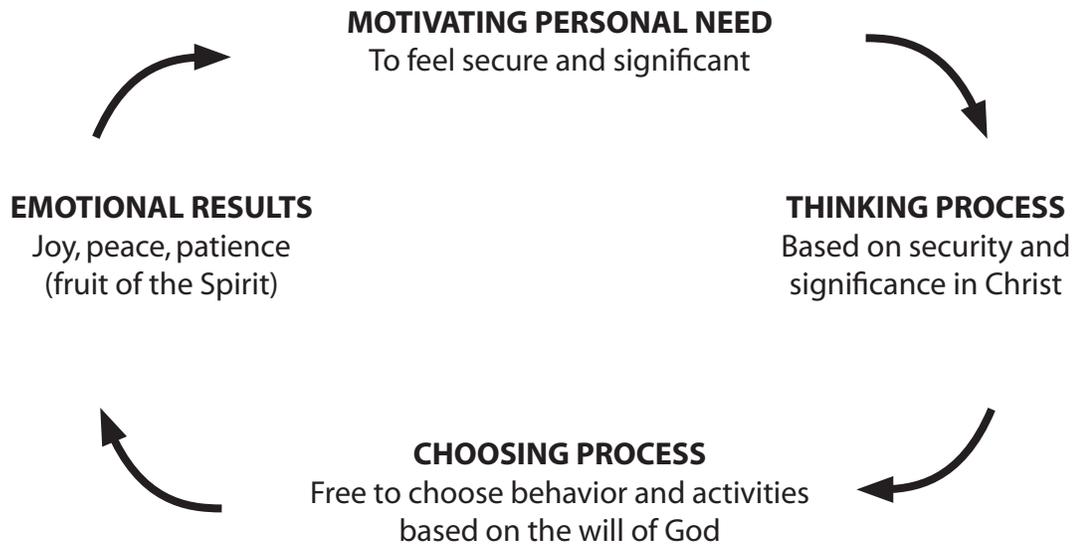


Figure C

7. PRACTICAL STEPS TOWARD RENEWED THINKING

In his booklet, “Changing Your Thought Patterns,” George Sanchez likens our thought processes to a hill upon which rain is falling. As the rain water hits the top of the hill and begins to run down, it forms rivulets that follow the grooves in the soil formed during previous rains, thus deepening the existing ruts and increasing the likelihood that subsequent rains also will follow that pattern of flow. The only way to change the flow of the rain water is to dam up the upper end of the groove and form a new groove into which the rain water can course down the hill. When the old, undesired groove is unused, gradually it will erode away and disappear.

Likewise with the pattern of our thoughts. Just as the rain started a flow of water down the existing groove in the soil, so a certain stimulus creates a stream of thought in our minds. The next time we encounter that same stimulus, our thoughts tend to follow the same course, until it becomes a deeply-engrained pattern. Only by blocking our initial response to the stimulus and creating a new pattern of thought in response to it can we renew our thinking process.

In the context of this discussion, we have seen that from the time we were a baby we formed assumptions about what we were like and what made us worthwhile. We based these assumptions on how we interpreted the reactions and opinions of other people. As mentioned earlier, by the time we were five, most of the assumptions had been formed and solidified, so that through subsequent years they may have been modified, but only slightly. The “grooves” through which our thought patterns flowed were established. Our resulting choices of behavior and activities have been influenced by the pattern of these thoughts.

Perhaps through the uncomfortable emotions we felt, or through recognizing the sinful behavior we had chosen, we saw our need for salvation, and we placed our trust in Jesus Christ. Now, as an ambassador for Christ and a member of His body, we can see that our sinful behavior and negative emotions need to be changed. We recognize that our thinking must be renewed. The old “grooves” need to be dammed up and new patterns of thought need to be formed, so that they can become the basis for changed attitudes and activities that can bring honor to our Lord and Savior.

Consider the case of Bob. As the fifth child in a family of seven children, his opinions were considered unimportant. His ideas were often laughed at. As a result, Bob withdrew, keeping his thoughts to himself. To his way of thinking, that was safer than to risk scorn or rejection. But Bob was also a very intelligent lad, and found some feelings of significance through his accomplishments. As a university student he excelled in his classes. In his career he worked hard, hoping not only to prove his significance, but also to win approval and acceptance in his family. He drove himself relentlessly to accomplish more and more. Though he had received Christ as a university student, the ingrained patterns of thought drove him to choose activities that could reap the results he felt would prove his worth.

Finally at the point of physical exhaustion, Bob stopped to evaluate the unconscious goals he was setting for himself. He came to recognize the false assumptions on which he was basing those goals designed for feeling secure and significant. He realized that the unconscious but prevalent thought that “my successful accomplishment of this project will cause my parents to recognize my value as a human being” was driving him to involve himself in more and more activities, especially activities in which he was skillful. At the same time, he avoided close personal relationships in order to prevent the possibility of emotional pain if his opinions were rejected. “Don’t tell anyone what you really think,” cautioned his inner voice.

The offer of a new project was like the rain hitting the top of the hill. As it coursed through the groove of his thinking pattern, the possibility of successful completion of the project was evaluated. A positive conclusion led to the addition of the project to Bob’s already full schedule. His busy-ness also provided an excuse for avoiding deep involvement with others. The approval he received for his work deepened the “groove” of his thinking pattern. His busy schedule seemed to be acceptable to others, so they did not feel that he was avoiding or rejecting them personally when he did not involve himself deeply in their lives.

The “groove” of Bob’s thinking pattern needed to be blocked at the top. A new thought pattern had to be created to handle the stimulus. He recognized that, when offered a new project, his first thought was, “What would my parents think about this project?” From there he would imagine their reaction to his successful completion of the project, as well as evaluate whether he could succeed. A dam needed to be placed at that first thought. As Bob considered it, he determined

that the first thought needed to be replaced with “Does the Lord want me to take on this project?”

After asking the Lord to help him in the renewal of his thinking, Bob employed a technique described by Norman Wright as **STOP-THINK**. On a card, Bob wrote, “What would my parents think about this project?” Then in big red letters he wrote, “STOP.” At the top of the reverse side of the card he wrote “THINK” in big green letters. Below that he wrote the first thought of the “new groove”: “Does the Lord want me to take on this new project?” From there the “new groove” included such evaluations as “I do not need to choose this project in order to be significant or to be accepted by my family, nor do I need to reject it because I might not be successful. I am significant because God has given me a specific function as a member of Christ’s body. Will this new project contribute to the carrying out of my special function?”

Each morning Bob read his STOP-THINK card. As he read the old response, he would see the big red command, STOP. That was the dam for the previously-engrained thought. Then he would turn the card over and re-read the new thought pattern, THINK, and the associated new thoughts. He reviewed the card a few times each day.

To reinforce the new foundation for his self-concept, Bob memorized Eph. 4:16 and 1 Pet. 4:10 regarding the importance of the particular gifts and abilities that the Lord had given him. He claimed Psalm 27:10 regarding his acceptance by the Lord even if he did not win the approval of his parents: “Thought my father and my mother forsake me, the Lord will receive me.” His daily time of meditation in the Word and prayer assured him of God’s constant love and guidance, and he began to grow spiritually.

At first Bob found that his thoughts tended to follow the old groove, but gradually the STOP warning became a more frequent reminder, and he worked to bring his thoughts to the new pattern. An awareness of anxiety about being successful was another reminder that made him realize that the old thought pattern was in progress, and he would quickly claim the promises of God related to his being significant apart from his accomplishments.

Bob came to realize other negative and inaccurate thought patterns that pulled his emotions down to discouragement and depression. He listened to what he was telling himself, such as: “That was a stupid comment I just made,” which led to “I fail often”, and then on to “I am just a failure; I can’t do anything right; I am dumb, dumb, dumb. I’d like to run away and hide. Why can’t I ever learn that I can’t communicate well and shouldn’t even try?” Such thoughts not only affected his emotional state but also caused him to withdraw from involvement with others. As the Holy Spirit reminded him of the Scriptural truths of his acceptance and value in God’s eyes, Bob learned to replace the thoughts of his worthlessness with praise to the Lord for his value to God.

All renewed thinking is based on truth as revealed through the Scriptures. Specific verses may help to provide the basis for, and the strengthening of, new thought patterns. The appendix at the end of this discussion lists a number of verses under various topics which may be of help in this renewal process.

Pinpointing the inaccuracies in our thinking is the work of the Holy Spirit. It is facilitated by prayer, dependence on His enlightenment, commitment to the renewal of our thinking, and meditation on the Word. The Holy Spirit can also guide our evaluation of our emotions to help reveal to us the goals we have unconsciously chosen to pursue, based on assumptions we have made regarding what will make us feel accepted and worthwhile. This will be discussed in the following section.

9. NEGATIVE EMOTIONS CAN BE USEFUL

Like symptoms that provide clues to a doctor as to the nature of his patient's illness, so also negative emotions can be used to indicate areas of faulty thinking that hinder our spiritual growth.

As Christians we often feel that certain emotions are sin. But just as a fever is only a result or symptom of the sickness, so also emotion is only a symptom or a reaction; of itself it is not sin. The **THINKING PROCESS** or the **CHOOSING PROCESS** that led to the emotion may be faulty or sinful, but the emotion itself is not sin. The action in response to that emotion, however, may be sinful.

An emotionally healthy Christian is in touch with his emotions. He does not repress them, ignoring their presence. Nor does he suppress them, holding them in and not revealing them to others. He may confess or express the emotion, but through reason and self-control does so in a manner that is not hurtful to himself or to others.

Being consciously aware of his emotions and acknowledging them to himself, the mature Christian can thus not only more fully enjoy the positive emotions he experiences, but can also use negative emotions to grow spiritually through being renewed in his thinking. A negative emotion can be a symptom that he is trying to bolster his sense of identity in the wrong way. Through acknowledging the **RESULTING EMOTION**, recognizing the **PROCESS OF CHOOSING** the behavior or activity which led to the emotion, and then identifying the **THINKING PROCESS** that influenced that choice, he can begin to correct and renew his mind in accordance with the truths of Scripture.

The three basic negative emotions are anger, depression, and anxiety. In seeking to identify the goal we had chosen which led to the negative emotion, it is helpful to keep in mind that:

1. **Anger** is a reaction to a *blocked* goal.
2. **Depression** results from an *unreachable* goal.
3. **Anxiety** indicates an *uncertain* goal.

Thus, through identifying the emotion we are experiencing, we can determine whether we are reacting to a blocked goal, an uncertain goal, or an unreachable goal. This can help us to pinpoint the goal behind our chosen behavior or activity, which we had chosen on the assumption that it would yield for us a sense of security and significance. This in turn can facilitate the exposure of the faulty thinking in that assumption.

ANGER

There are three basic causes of anger; that is, there are three types of goals that may be blocked and result in anger:

1. **Frustration.** We did not get what I wanted in terms of plans. Because of this we have to admit that we were unable to be in control and master our situation. We feel that our competence is being threatened.
2. **Humiliation.** We did not get what we wanted in terms of status. We “lost face”. We feel that we have lost significance.
3. **Rejection.** We did not get what we wanted in terms of love. We no longer feel accepted and secure.

Thus, when we realize that we are angry, we can recognize that anger results when our goal has been blocked. We then ask ourselves, “What was my goal? What behavior or activity had I chosen to reach that goal, but which failed and I became angry? Why did I think that behavior or activity would fulfill that goal? On what faulty basis am I resting my sense of security and significance?”

Suppose, for example, we are angry and resentful because of several setbacks in the finishing of a project on time. It may be that proficiency and efficiency are a means we felt would provide us with a feeling of significance. Failure to meet the deadline might result in a loss of status, an important factor in our security.

Our angry reaction to our child’s misbehavior may result from the faulty assumption that we must be a perfect parent in order to feel worthwhile. Resentment at rejection because of a physical “defect” could point out to us that we are reading the faulty mirror of the reactions of others to establish our sense of self-acceptance

It should be added here that anger is not always indicative of wrong thinking. Jesus Himself became angry. Scripture indicates that righteous anger is possible. Such anger could be described as a resolute attitude of indignation against sin and is accompanied by appropriate action. Righteous anger is controlled and subject to reason. It is unselfish and has no hatred or resentment. Because righteous anger is directed against wrong actions or situations, not against people, it should lead to constructive action to correct the wrong.

DEPRESSION

Depression can result from physical causes such as improper diet, insufficient rest, or reaction to certain drugs. It can be caused by biochemical imbalance, hormonal

disturbance, or infection. It may follow the loss of a loved one, a job, or some important opportunity. Grief depression such as this is usually not characterized by lowered self-esteem and will diminish in intensity with time.

Apart from these causes, depression may also result from false guilt because of faulty thinking and unrealistic expectations, or from real guilt because of sin that has not been confessed. It is these causes of depression to which we will direct our attention here.

Whereas anger arises because of an attack from our environment, depression results from attack upon oneself. We judge that we have failed, and that this loss is damaging to our personal worth. We further conclude that we are not worthwhile. Because it then becomes impossible to feel good about ourselves, we feel guilty, angry, hopeless, sad, and apathetic. We lose perspective and withdraw from others, lest we be rejected. We are oversensitive to what others say and do. We desire to escape from problems and even from life itself.

Most of our guilt feelings are related to what people think of us and to our feelings of failure. We are evaluating ourselves with a faulty mirror or by the standard of a false ideal, and condemn ourselves with false guilt.

True guilt results from choosing sinful behavior, but it will not lead to depression if we go to God, confess our sin and believe His promise to forgive and cleanse (1 John 1:9). On the other hand, a person may try to handle the guilt himself instead of going to God. Because it is not possible for him to do that, he concludes that he is a failure, that he is incapable of behaving in the right way, that he has no worth and is unlovable. On the other hand, a person may try to handle the guilt himself, instead of going to God. Because it is not possible for him to do that, he concludes that he is a failure, that he is incapable of behaving in the right way, that he has no worth and is unlovable. Such thoughts convince him that it is impossible to reach his goal of being an acceptable person, and depression results.

False guilt, the self-condemnation related to poor self-image, may need to be corrected at the **THINKING PROCESS** level. We need to evaluate whether we are seeking to feel acceptable to others through our appearance, performance, or status. As before, we need to replace negative thoughts regarding our worthwhileness with the truths of our total acceptance by God Himself.

ANXIETY

Anxiety is a feeling of dread or uneasiness, but unlike fear, it may not have a reasonable cause. Fear is a reasonable and appropriate reaction, to a real danger, such as seeing a child dart out into a busy street. The cause of anxiety and apprehension, however, may be difficult to pinpoint.

As with other negative emotions, we must first rule out physical causes. Fatigue, inadequate exercise, poor diet, certain medications, or hormonal imbalance can contribute to feelings of anxiety.

Anxiety also may be the result of unrealistic standards set by others or by ourselves. Therefore we should consider whether our feeling of uneasiness relates to our perceiving a discrepancy between our level of achievement and the accomplishment we think society regards as desirable. We can see that this cause of anxiety relates to wrong thinking or a wrong choice of activity or behavior.

Does my anxiety when meeting new people reflect a dependence on their acceptance and approval to meet my need for security and significance? Does that knot in my stomach as I approach the project deadline indicate an assumption that I must be successful in order to feel worthwhile? Does my nervousness at a job interview indicate a concern that my appearance and performance give the right impression, rather than trusting God for the outcome of the interview?

As with anger, guilt and depression, the honest recognition of the presence of anxiety in a given situation can be a clue to the assumptions we have made regarding what makes us feel accepted and worthwhile. It can make us aware of areas in which we are not really trusting the Lord to work out His perfect plan for our life and for the lives of others.

9. SUMMARY

The Christian growing toward spiritual maturity is one who is seeking to build an accurate self-concept based on the unchangeable truths of God's character and His Word. He realizes that his basic motivating personal need of being secure and significant are met in Jesus Christ. He can accept himself as a unique design by God, created for specific achievement and function. Thus released from the insecure concept of himself based on the opinions of others, he can replace the old methods of evaluation with new thinking, based on God's truth. As his thinking is changed, his behavior can be determined by God's will rather than his need to continually verify his self-worth. He grows in the fruit of the Spirit, becoming more like Jesus Christ.

Having discovered that we are somebody to God, we automatically regard others as somebody. We can relate to others as equals, rather than as being superior or inferior to us. We do not have to manipulate and be defensive or critical, but can genuinely love and be interested in others. Our basic fear of people abates. We can become all that God intends us to become as members of the body of Christ.

APPENDIX

A selection of verses useful for the remolding of the self-concept

WHO I AM AS A CHRISTIAN

"All honor to God, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ; for it is His boundless mercy that has given us the privilege of being born again, so that we are now members of God's own family." 1 Pet. 1:3 (Living Bible)

"For if a man is in Christ he becomes a new person altogether—the past is finished and gone, everything has become fresh and new.

2 Cor. 5:17 (Phillips)

"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ for giving us through Christ every possible spiritual benefit as citizens of Heaven." Eph. 1:3 (Phillips)

...His divine power has given us all things that are needful for life and godliness through our getting to know Him who has called us to share His glory and virtue."

2 Pet. 1:3

Others: 1 John 3:1; 1 Cor. 6:19,20

SIGNIFICANCE

"But you are God's 'chosen generation,' 'His 'royal priesthood,' 'His 'peculiar people'" —all the old titles of God's people now belong to you. It is for you now to demonstrate the goodness of Him who has called you out of darkness into His amazing light." 1 Pet. 2:9,10 (Phillips)

"In any great house there are not only gold and silver articles but also wooden utensils, some for honorable uses and some for lowly uses. So if a man will cleanse himself from these things [false beliefs and unrighteousness], he will be an instrument for honorable uses, consecrated, useful for the Master, and ready for any good service." 2 Tim. 2:20 (Williams)

"So, my dear brothers, since future victory is sure, be strong and steady, always abounding in the Lord's work, for you know that nothing you do for the Lord is ever wasted." 1 Cor. 15:58 (Living Bible)

MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE

"He said to me, 'You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will display all my splendor.'" (Is. 49:3)

"I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death." (Phil. 3:10)

Others: Is. 43:7; Gen. 1:28; Ps. 8:5-9; 100:2,3; Acts 20:24; John 20:21; Phil. 3:14

HONORED AND VALUED BY GOD

"Since you are precious and honored in my sight, and because I love you, I will give men in exchange for you, and people in exchange for your life." (Is. 43:4)

"He will call upon me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble, I will deliver him and honor him." (Ps. 91:15)

Others: John 17:22,23; Luke 7:28; Rom. 8:30 1 Cor. 2:7; 2 Thess. 1:12; 2 Cor. 3:18; Ps. 91:15; 1 Pet. 1:6,7; 2 Cor. 4:16-18; Is. 62:3-5; Mat. 6:26; 10: 31; Deut. 32:9,10; Zeph.3:17; Ps. 147:11;149:4; Eph.1:11,18

USEFUL FOR HIS GLORY

“And provide for those who grieve in Zion—to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of his splendor.” (Is. 61:3)

“I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.” (Phil. 1:20)

Others: Is. 43:7; Mat. 5:13-16; John 14:13; Rom. 15:5-7; 2 Cor. 9:11-13; 1 Pet. 2: 12; 4:10,11

INFLUENTIAL FOR GOOD

“But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him.” (2 Cor. 2: 14)

“In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.” (Matt. 5:16)

Others: John 7:37,38; Is. 49:3,4; Gal. 6:9,10; Is. 58:7-12; Prov.31:20,27

HIS REPRESENTATIVE

“So that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe.” (Phil. 2:15)

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8)

Others: John 20:21; 2 Cor. 5:19,20; 1 Pet. 2:10; 3:15

BELONGINGNESS

“But now you belong to Christ Jesus, and though you once were far away from God, now you have been brought very near to Him because of what Jesus Christ has done for you with His blood.” Eph. 2:13 (Living Bible)

“Now you are no longer strangers to God and foreigners to heaven, but you are members of God’s very own family, citizens of God’s country, and you belong in God’s household with every other Christian.”

Eph. 2:19 (Living Bible)

“I will never leave you nor forsake you.” Heb. 13:5

ACCEPTED AND INCLUDED

“All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away.”(John 6:37)

Others: Luke 15:20-24; 1 Cor. 6:11; Eph. 1:6; 2 Cor. 6:16-18

NEAR TO GOD, INTIMATELY RELATED

“Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations.” (Ps. 91:1)

“For this is what the high and lofty One says, he who lives forever, whose name is holy: ‘I live in a high and holy place, but also with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit.’” (Is. 57:15)

Others: Ps. 73:23; 57:1; 21:1,9; John 14:18-20; Heb. 10:22; James 4:8

HIS CHILD AND HEIR

“But when the time had fully come, God sent his son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts. the Spirit who calls out, ‘Abba, Father.’ So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir.” (Gal. 4:4-7)

Others: John 1:12,13; 3:6; Rom. 8:14-17,29; 2 Cor. 6:17,18; 1 Pet. 1:23-2:3

HIS FRIEND, CONFIDANTE

“You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.” (John 15:14,15)

Others: Ps. 25:14; Mal. 2:6; 1 Cor. 1:9; Rev. 3:20

A CITIZEN OF HIS KINGDOM

“But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ.” (Phil. 3:20)

Others: 1 Pet. 2:9-11; Luke 12:32; Ps. 100:3; Col. 1:13; John 17:16; Heb. 11:13-16; John 14:1,2

WORTHINESS

“Now God says He will accept and acquit us...God declares us ‘not guilty’ of offending Him if we trust in Jesus Christ, who in His kindness freely takes away our sins. For God sent Christ Jesus to take the punishment for our sins.” Rom. 3:22-25 (Living Bible)

“Since then it is by faith that we are justified (made right in God’s sight), let us grasp the fact that we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” Rom. 5:1 (Phillips)

“‘And their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more.’ Where God grants remission of sin there can be no question of making further atonement...So, by virtue of the blood of Jesus... let us draw near with fullest confidence, knowing that our inmost souls have been purified...” Heb. 10:17-22 (Phillips)

ACQUITTED, NO CONDEMNATION

“Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”

Rom. 8:1

Others: John 5:24; Rom. 8:32,33; 1 Cor. 1:8; Heb. 8:12; Ps. 34:22; 103:10,11

JUSTIFIED, RIGHTEOUS

“Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” Rom. 5:1

Others: Is. 61:10; Rom. 3:21-26; 5:17; 2 Cor. 5:21; 1 Cor. 6:11

CLEAN

“You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you.” John 15:3

Others: Is. 1:18; Tit. 3:5; 2 Pet. 1:4; 1 John 1:9; Heb. 9:14

FORGIVEN

“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” 1 John 1:9

Others: Eph. 1:7; Ps. 130:3,4; Is. 43:25; 44:22; 55:7; Acts 13:38

COMPETENCE

“I have strength for all things in Christ Who empowers me—I am ready for anything and equal to anything through Him Who infuses inner strength into me.” Phil. 4:13 (Amplified)

“Not that we are in any way confident of our own resources—our ability comes from God. It is He who makes us competent...” 2 Cor. 3:5,6 (Phillips)

“He said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness’.” 2 Cor. 12:9

“Though I am surrounded by troubles, You will bring me safely through them...The Lord will fulfill His purpose for me; Your steadfast love, O Lord, endures forever. You will not drop the work You have begun.” Ps. 138:7,8

“Leave it all quietly to God, my soul, my rescue comes from Him alone; rock, rescue, refuge, He is all to me. Never shall I be overthrown.” Ps. 62:1,2 (Moffat)

ADEQUATE, COMPETENT

“Not that we are competent to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.”

2 Cor. 3:5,6

Others: Rom. 8:26; Josh. 1:8,9; Prov. 16:3; Jer. 17:7,8; Ps. 27:3; 56: 4,10,11; 112: 7,8; Is. 26:3,4; Phil. 1:6; Heb. 13:6

ENABLED, ENERGIZED, EMPOWERED

“For it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.” Phil. 2:13

Others: 2 Cor. 13:4; Rom. 8:11; Eph. 1:19,20; Col. 1:29; 1 Peter 4:11

STRONG

“He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.” Is. 40:29-31

Others: 2 Cor. 12:9,10; Col. 1:11; Ps. 73:26; 138:3; Is. 30:15; 45:24; Hab. 3: 19

PROVIDED FOR

“And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus.” Phil. 4:19

Others: Matt. 6:33; Ps. 23:1,2,5; Eph. 1:3; 1 Cor. 9:8

ASSURED OF HIS LEADING AND DIRECTION

“I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you and watch over you. Do not be like the horse or the mule, which have no understanding but must be controlled by bit and bridle or they will not come to you.” Ps. 32:8,9

Others: Ps. 4:8; 40:2; Is. 33:6; Ps 62:5,6; Mat. 7:24,25; Rom. 8:31-39; Eph. 4:14,15

PROTECTED

“Have mercy on me, O God, have mercy on me, for in you my soul takes refuge. I will take refuge in the shadow of your wings until the disaster has passed. I cry out to God Most High, to God, who fulfills his purpose for me.” Ps. 57:1,2

Others: Deut. 33:27; Ps. 91; Is. 43:2; Rom. 8:37-39

SECURE, STABLE IN ANY CIRCUMSTANCES

“The fruit of righteousness will be peace; the effect of righteousness will be quietness and confidence forever. My people will live in peaceful dwelling places, in secure homes, in undisturbed places of rest.” Is. 32:17,18

Others: Ps. 25:8,9,12; 119:105; Is. 30:20,21; 48:17; 42:16; John 16:13

HAVE AN ASSURED FUTURE

“Oh, that their hearts would be inclined to fear me and keep all my commands always, so that it might go well with them and their children forever!”

(Deut. 5: 29)

Others: Ps. 138:8; Prov.23:17,18; Eccl. 8:12,13; Is. 3:10; Jer. 29:11; Rom. 8: 18

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