

**CHRISTIAN
FAITHING
&
SELF-ESTEEM**

RALPH BLAIR

This booklet is an expanded version of Ralph Blair's keynote address at the summer connECTions85 held in Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and California.

Dr. Blair is a psychotherapist in private practice in New York City. He is founder of Evangelicals Concerned, Inc.

Christian Faithing and Self-Esteem

“We are what we are.” That’s what the line of female impersonators sings as the sun goes down and the nightclub lights come up at the opening of the Broadway hit, *La Cage aux Folles*. [1] “We are what we are, and what we are is an illusion,” sings the “Pride of St. Tropez,” “fac[ing] life with a little guts and lots of glitter.”

These words by Jerry Herman are intended to be a “triumphant” reprise throughout the show, but they are, I think, sad words, ineffectual and defensive, words of empty and hollow defiance.

The next number repeats the theme in even greater irony as Albin, who becomes ZaZa, sits on the john seat in his dressing room preparing, as he puts it, “once again ... to be someone who’s anyone else but me.” Why? In order to “cope again, [to] hope again” when “life’s a real bitch again.” His solution? “The Big Switch: I put a little more mascara on.” And instead of being depressed by the “tired old face” that he sees, he claims that then “Everything’s sparkle dust, bugle beads, ostrich plumes, when it’s a beaded lash you’re looking through!” And when he “needs something level to lean upon,” he sings, “I hustle out my highest drag and put a little more mascara on.” Then again, “Everything’s ravishing, sensual, fabulous: when Albin’s tucked away and ZaZa is here!” Poor Albin. He has no better solution “when,” as he puts it: his “self-esteem has begun to drift” than to “strap on [his] fake boobs again and literally give [himself] a lift.” He knows no better way “to make depression disappear” than to “screw some rhinestones on my ear, and put my broaches and tiara and a little more mascara on.”

At the end of Act 1, Albin is hurt and angry, feeling what one feels believing he’s been rejected, believing he’s not loved as is, and he picks up the hollow discord once again as he sings in garish defense: “I am what I am.” Unwittingly internalizing what he believes is the judgment of others against himself, he repeats his mistake and invites even more judgment from those to whom he sings: “Come, take a look, give me the hook or the ovation.”

Invictus-like, he tries to take control, insisting: “I am my own special creation!” Trying desperately to be enough in himself by asserting an unbelievable autonomy, he shouts: “I deal my own deck, I bang my own drum ... It’s my world.” The poor guy, all alone on the stage, demands in a grandly sustained excuse: “I am what I am and what I am needs no excuses.” The one who has “tucked Albin away” to hide behind ZaZa’s sparkle dust, shouts out: “It’s my world, not a place I have to hide in!” He yells: “Life’s a sham ... not worth a damn ... until you can shout out ‘I am what I am’”—yet he sees what he can’t admit: that his life is in shambles through all of the shouting, and he storms off stage.

Every effort such as Albin’s, at self-justification—trusting the creature instead of the Creator—is evidence of foolish pride and results in a terrifying suspicion of insignificance and impotence which in turn is attempted to be overcome with even more effort, more self-deluding self-obsession and narcissism and then will come more despairing failure to ever measure up. Any attempt to overcome the fact of one’s terrible sense “I’m Little Miss Nothing” with the fiction that one tries to believe “I’m Little Miss Everything” merely flips the coin of deadly pride. Poor Albin is playing omnipotency games when what he desperately needs is to be praying to Omnipotence Herself.

And having tried to define himself by his high drag homosexuality, he falls for the mistake of those who would sit in judgment on him, for they too define Albin— and us—too narrowly. Albin is then left only to try to defend the indefensible: to make his high drag everything. But everything cannot be “sparkle dust and bugle beads” because everything is so very much more than that.

Dear Albin: You are far prettier than you know. Your “own special creation” is ZaZa. Don’t you know that Albin is God’s own special creation? Life’s not worth a damn until you can say, with Saint Paul: “I am what I am—by the grace of God.” [I Cor 15:9f] While Paul could rejoice: “For me to live is Christ,” Albin has concluded only that “For me to live is ZaZa.”

Going back even further in time, that same God Paul knew, the ever-living God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, announced to Moses: “I AM What I AM.” [Exod 3:14] “I cause to be what is.” That was a word-play on the root of the word for God: “Yahweh—The One Who Is.” When the Lord told Moses he was being sent to Pharaoh to bring the Israelites out of Egyptian bondage, Moses’ own self-confidence fluttered: “Who am I to do this?” Focusing on who Moses was was paralyzing. Yahweh directed Moses’ focus to another perspective. “Who is sending you, Moses? I AM Who I AM is sending you; I AM What I AM is with you.”

At the conclusion of a *20/20* interview with Harvey Fierstein, who wrote the book for *La Cage*, Barbara Walters turned to co-host Hugh Downs with a final comment: “And Hugh,” she said, “the song ‘I am what I am’ . . . not only expresses what homosexuals feel. But more importantly, it represents the deepest yearnings in all of us: to be loved and accepted and respected for what we are.”

Certainly everyone does want to be loved—and not “more importantly” Barbara, for being heterosexual. This desire is universal, but we are afraid that we can’t be loved “for what we are” because we ourselves are quick to conclude that “what we are” does not qualify for such love.

As Christians, though, we have so much more to sing about, to celebrate, than did Albin. We have our own theme song, expressing that same deepest yearning but also expressing our deepest faithing to be loved and accepted just as we are. According to the Bible, we have reason to believe that God has already loved us even as His enemies, and continues to love us just as we are as even rebellious sons and daughters.

Next year will be the 150th anniversary of the text of one of our theme songs, a hymn written by an invalid at Brighton, on the southern coast of England. She wrote out of intense despair that in her physical suffering and bed-ridden condition she was good for nothing, *invalid*. Her brother, an Anglican priest, and others in the parish were busy preparing for revival while she was forced to stay in bed. But Charlotte Elliott penned the memorable lines of a hymn that has urged millions to accept God’s unmerited favor and peace: “Just as I am, without one plea [no excuses, no pretensions, no defensiveness] except to say ‘Thy blood was shed for me’ and that ‘Thou bidd’st me come to Thee just as I am ... O Lamb of God, I come! ... Just as I am, Thou wilt receive, welcome, pardon, cleanse, relieve. ... Because Thy promise I believe, O Lamb of God, I come to Thee.”

About the same time that Charlotte Elliott was writing these words, Alexis de Tocqueville, the French critic, was touring America. He observed: "Each citizen is habitually engaged in the contemplation of a very puny object, namely himself." That this French visitor was, himself, engaged in the contemplation of these very same "puny" objects probably makes him more suspiciously obsessive than they for at least they were minding their own business. As we Americans approach the 21st century, we seem as self-obsessed as ever, maybe even more so. And it is just this perception of our being too "puny," too insignificant, too inadequate, that propels our anxious obsession with ourselves.

People way back in Bible days did what we do when we wonder about ourselves, though perhaps they did it more poetically. You remember that the Psalmist wrote a hymn of praise to Yahweh in which he contemplated himself but, unlike so many moderns, did so within the wider context of God: "When I look up at Thy heavens, the work of Thy fingers, the moon and the stars created by Thee, What are human beings, that Thou dost take thought of them? Mortal beings, that Thou dost care for them?"

When we simply gaze up into the starry night, it would seem that if we have any thought about it, we too are struck by how insignificantly puny we seem in contrast to the vast "frame and furniture" of the heavens, as Matthew Henry phrased it.

And back there in that dark Middle East, millions of nights ago, that unknown psalmist had no realistic idea of how very vast the heavens are. He thought the universe was a flat earth supported over a watery abyss and that overhead, not very far away, was arched a kind of tent holding back the waters above it and to which were fastened the discs of the sun, moon and lots of twinkling stars. How much greater would have been his sense of awe and his sense of his own relative size, if he had but known as we do today the fact that in the Andromeda galaxy alone there are billions and billions and billions of stars and there are billions and billions of other galaxies. Nevertheless, the psalmist was overwhelmed by even his conception of the universe and he marveled that "Thou, God, hast nonetheless made humankind just a bit less than God, crowning us with glory and honor." [Psalm 8]

Some of you may have been reared in churches where this verse was rendered more modestly as "a little lower than the angels." But in the original Hebrew text the term is 'Elohim, the most common word for God in the Old Testament. We're created "a little lower than God!" and we're "crowned with glory and honor."

Thousands of years after these words were first spoken, a spiritual son of this psalmist, the Apostle Paul, stood on Mars Hill in Athens, speaking to the philosophers, saying that God was not far from each of us, for, said Paul: "We all live in God and we all have our being and move in God. As some of your own poets have said, 'We are God's offspring.'" [Acts 17:28]

Today we have all sorts of ways to think of and demonstrate the value of a person. To terrorists in the Middle East and Ireland lives of enemies are cheap. Life is cheap, too, to muggers, The Mafia, drug abusers, tobacco executives, heartless bureaucrats, greedy real-estate magnates, gay bath owners and customers, drunk drivers, abortionists and anti-abortionists and antigay fundamentalist bullies. Even the \$650,000 figure that the Federal Aviation Administration says is

“the value of a statistical life” seems very cheap when placed next to the psalmist’s estimate and awe.

But no matter how cheaply others regard us, and no matter how cheaply we regard others, it seems strange that we, too, regard ourselves cheaply, even though we can be grossly self-obsessed over our own supposed puniness. In our very effort at self-affirmation we can so easily, in effect if not intent, abuse ourselves obscenely.

And our low self-regard is not at all unrelated to both the way others regard us and the way we regard others. As we’ll note more fully later, our appraisal of the value of ourselves was formed under the influence of what we perceived to be others’ appraisals of us and our appraisal of the value of others flows from our appraisal of ourselves.

In 15 years of doing psychotherapy, I’ve observed that people have no more persistently prevalent difficulty than negative self-esteem and that that influences everything from personal life to social life to work life to sex life to love life to spiritual life to the matter of life and death itself.

One’s self-esteem can be thought about in terms of two perceptions in interaction: a sense of *being* (I am) and a sense of *doing* (I can). But what “I am” and what “I can” is believed to be rather, “I am not” and “I can’t.” That is, “I am not who or what I should be” and “I can’t do what I’m supposed to do.” Such interactive pessimism about one’s being and efficacy produces depression and paralysis.

In 1908, the great British Bible expositor G. Campbell Morgan delivered a series of lectures at The Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City. In one of them he referred to his contemporary, the pioneering American psychologist William James and to his observation that there is in the human condition a primal sense that there is “something wrong.” As Morgan analyzed it: “Man having taken his being and doing, the I am and the I can of him, out of relationship to God, is out of orbit.” [2]

If Morgan’s description and analysis is biblically sound—and I believe that it is—it would seem as though the problem of low self-esteem could be corrected simply through re-establishing a right relationship with God. Theoretically, that sounds right. It has even been defended theologically, and psychologically attempted, in varied works, from serious tomes to the fluff of popular “inspirational” ditties.

Although some empirical psychological research has shown that so-called “religious” people evidence high levels of self-esteem [3], especially when the investigation is based on the questionable use of self-reports, there is, on the other hand some evidence that self-esteem and so-called religious orthodoxy are negatively correlated. [4] After years in which preachers have dumped condemnation and perfectionism into our laps I’m not surprised that so many professing Christians are trapped under low self-esteem. Their training as Christians has been to meet the mark in mastering life instead of meeting the mark in the Master of Life. According to evangelical psychologist Charles Penner, clients from such strict perfectionist church backgrounds are either disillusioned by “a cheap presentation of the born-again experience” that

holds out a simplistic promise of complete change or they are filled with neurotic guilt because they cannot live up to the perfectionist demands of their preachers. [5] Several studies can't distinguish significant differences in self-esteem levels between "religious" and "nonreligious" people. [6] These findings have prompted another conservative Christian psychologist (from the Taylor University Counseling Center) to ask: "Why don't the new creatures like themselves any more than do non-Christians?" [7]

I'd like to suggest two overall ways of responding to this vital question. One way is to look at the experiences of some individual heroes of faith to see if what seems to be the general experience of "average" Christians has also been the experience of "outstanding" Christians. We may be surprised at what we find. For I'm sure that one of the church's most pathetic disservices to Christians and non-Christians alike is the flaunting of fairy-tale versions of saved sinners who have been leaders in the history of Christianity.

We have been misled into expecting that the Christian life is a Sunday School picnic where all the sisters and brothers are jumping up and down singing: "I'm so happy happy happy every day in every way 'cause I'm on my way to gold dust in the sky by and by!" Why, you'd think the Christian life was a Mary Kay convention!

Now I certainly don't want to imply that Christians have not and cannot and do not experience real joy, happiness, laughter—though there are some of us who have seen more than a few Christian eye-brows raised when it was judged that other followers of Him who was said to hang around too much with "wine bibbers and sinners" seemed to be enjoying themselves more than were the eyebrow raisers. But Zwingli said: "The Truth has a happy face." John Wesley said: "Every believer ought to enjoy life." The Puritan Richard Baxter said: "There is no mirth like the mirth of believers." Luther said: "If you're not allowed to laugh in heaven, I don't want to go there."

Nonetheless, as you recall from your knowledge of Luther, much of his own experience was anything but laughs and the same can be said of Wesley, Baxter, Zwingli and virtually every other well-known sainted sinner. But taking a cue from our first parents who sewed fig leaves together to try to cover their own embarrassment at falling short of what they said was expected of them, many of these Christians and their followers have not been as candid as Luther, for example, and often have covered-up what was believed to be their disgraceful lack of faith and discipleship so that they have not always appeared as the saved sinners they really were. Consequently, we have been misled into thinking that there is something unusually sinful about our own failures, self-doubts, weaknesses, depression, indeed "imperfections," because we don't actualize their press releases in our own lives. Through subtle and not so subtle teaching, we are taught to think, as Christians, that we must keep the "outside of the cup" all polished and pretty.

A trite illustration of this hypocrisy is a rule at Jerry Falwell's Liberty University that forbids students' listening to country and western music. Falwell acknowledges that "the students know I love country and western, and listen to it at home. But it's the discipline that counts. Families send their children here for discipline and values." [8] A more tragic illustration of this church-fostered hypocrisy is the sick joke known as the "ex-gay" movement. Fundamentalist and Charismatic demagogues who push its false promises don't seem to give a damn about the

internal churnings of unfulfilled needs for intimacy in the hearts of gay men and lesbians. They'll be yelling "Thank you, Jeezuzz!!" if only there's no mutual genital nerve-ending stimulation.

While wrestling with three unsuccessful suicide attempts, William Cowper was interrupted by the visit of a friend. Cowper, you recall, was the 18th century author of "There Is A Fountain Filled With Blood drawn from Emmanuel's veins, And sinners plunged beneath that flood lose all their guilty stains." When his friend barged in on him, Cowper pretended "cheerfulness" and waited for the visitor to leave. "Behold," he wrote afterward, "into what extremities a good sort of man may fall! Such was I, in the estimation of those who knew me best: a decent outside is all a good-natured world requires." [9] How sad!

While serving the parish of Venn Ottery in the West Country of England, Augustus Montague Toplady, the 18th century Anglican priest who wrote "Rock of Ages, cleft for me, let me hide myself in Thee" wrote in agreement with his hymn: "amidst all our doubts respecting ourselves, there is yet a foundation, both sure and steadfast, even the rock of God's election. Were it not for this, how would our hands hang down." [10] This was thirteen years after his Christian conversion. But a scant four months later, just before embarking upon what would be his longest service, in the parish of Broadhembury in Devonshire, Toplady's hands did "hang down," albeit in private, as this finicky bachelor confided in his diary: "Had it not been for fear of exposing myself and disturbing the family, I should have roared for the disquietness of my heart. My heavenly Pilot disappeared; I seemed to have lost my hold on the rock of ages; I sunk in deep mire; and the waves and storms went over me." [11] Toplady could believe that his Pilot would guide even the beasts of the field home to heaven, that the Rock of Ages hid even the souls of birds, [12] but he himself went through "long intervals of barrenness and want of joy." [13]

Feeling consistently great about ourselves is simply not the way the Christian life has usually been experienced by the "greatest" Christians. John Wesley suffered the rejection of both the established church and his merciless wife. Both John and his brother Charles suffered, at times, the rejection of each other and each had his days of self-doubt. Even after their dramatic conversions of 1738, "Both brothers continued to know paralysing moods of depression and self-condemnation. 'I do *not* love God,'" John wrote to Charles in 1766, "I never did. I am only an honest heathen. ... If I have any fear, it is not of falling into hell, but of falling into nothing." [14] Again in a letter to Charles a few years later on (1772) John admitted: "I often cry out 'Give me back my former life! Let me be again an Oxford Methodist!' I did walk closely with God and redeem the time. But what have I been doing these thirty years?" [15] How easy it was for even John Wesley to fix on a striving dependency on almost anything but the unmerited grace of God!

Another bachelor, Isaac Watts, was known to some as the "Father of English Hymnody." He wrote, among other hymns, "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross," "O God Our Help in Ages Past," and "Jesus Shall Reign Where'ere the Sun." (He was "Mother Watts" to others—but that's another story.) For many years, this brilliant Christian could not sleep without the use of drugs. [16]

We've already mentioned another bachelor, William Cowper, who tried to kill himself three times (with drugs, by hanging, and by drowning in the Thames). In his struggle with severe depression and the notion that God had given him up forever, Cowper developed a life-long

opium habit. As Robert Southey, his most famous biographer, described it: “Cowper represents himself as having lived in an uninterrupted course of sin. ... Sometimes, indeed, a question would arise in his mind whether it were safe to proceed in a course so utterly condemned in the word of God; he saw that it must inevitably end in destruction if the gospel were true; but he saw not by what means he might change” [17]

Robert Robinson, author of the hymn, “Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing” ended his life in instability, sin and despair—literally living out his own text: “Prone to wander, Lord I feel it, Prone to leave the God I love.” [18] It seemed that the “Streams of mercy, never ceasing” had indeed run dry for him.

The greatest English preacher of the 19th century was a wine connoisseur who smoked his fine cigars “to the glory of God” and with thanksgiving for “the intense pain relieved, a weary brain soothed, and calm, refreshing sleep obtained by a cigar.” [19] But Charles Hadden Spurgeon suffered “severe depressions” and, as one of his biographers reports, “even his desperate calling upon God often brought him no relief. ‘There are dungeons,’ [Spurgeon] said, ‘beneath the Castle of Despair, and he had often been in them.’” [20]

The Christmas carol, “O Little Town of Bethlehem,” was written by Phillips Brooks, the Boston Brahmin bachelor who was the toast of the town in “Gay 90s” society. (His 150th anniversary is celebrated this year.) Not only did Brooks remind his congregation that we all “do struggle, even those who at last fall most utterly,” but he said that “It would seem as if anybody needed only to remember his own history and to study his own consciousness to be assured of that.” Brooks spoke autobiographically of “the days when [he had] sinned most dreadfully” and said we “dare not tell anyone.” He reflected: “You know the nights of darkness and the days of hope. You remember the misery of the last yielding.” [21]

Well, there is something amiss in the question: “Why don’t the new creatures like themselves any better?” What in *this* world did we expect? What in *this* world should we otherwise expect of saved sinners? Preachers have dangerously misled Christians into expecting that we should always be able to think well of ourselves. That will not be the everyday experience of people just because they are Christians. That is not the meaning of the “more abundant living” in Christ. It certainly was not Paul’s own experience when, as an Apostle of Christ, he cried: “O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? [Rom 7:24] Paul admits how unhappy he was with himself. “I do not understand my own actions,” he writes [Rom 7:15], “I don’t do what I want or intend to do, but I do the very thing I hate.”

One hundred years ago, the Princeton theologian Charles Hodge commented on Paul’s frustration: “The language of the apostle, in this passage, expresses a fact of consciousness, with which every Christian is familiar. ... every Christian can adopt the language of this verse.” [22] This consciousness of what Luther, in his commentary on Romans, called “the spiritual man” and *not* “the carnal man” [23] is given autobiographical expression in the personal recollections of C. H. Spurgeon. It was Spurgeon’s experience that, as he tells it, “about five days after I first found Christ, when my joy had been such that I could have danced for very mirth at the thought that Christ was mine, on a sudden I fell into a sad fit of despondency. ... I was going to be perfect,—I fully calculated upon it,—and lo, I found an intruder I had not reckoned upon, an evil

heart of unbelief in departing from the living God. So I went to that same Primitive Methodist Chapel where I first received peace with God, through the simple preaching of the Word. The text happened to be, ‘O wretched man that I am: who shall deliver me from the body of this death?’ ‘There,’ I thought, ‘that’s the text for me.’ I had just got as far as that in the week. I knew that I had put my trust in Christ, and I knew that, when I sat in the house of prayer, my faith was simply and solely fixed on the atonement of the Redeemer. But I had a weight on my mind, because I could not be as holy as I wanted to be. I could not live without sin. When I rose in the morning, I thought I would abstain from every hard word, from every evil thought and look; and I came up to that chapel groaning because, ‘when I would do good, evil was present with me.’ The minister began by saying, ‘Paul was not a believer when he said this.’ Well now, I knew I was a believer, and it seemed to me from the context that Paul must have been a believer, too. (Now, I am sure he was.) The man went on to say that no child of God ever did feel any conflict within. So I took up my hat, and left the chapel, and I have very seldom attended such places since. ... I saw that that minister understood nothing of experimental divinity, or of practical heart theology, or else he would not have talked as he did. A good man he was, I do not doubt, but utterly incompetent to the task of dealing with a case like mine.” [24]

There is, I think, another way, an even more basic way, to respond to this question of low self-esteem. We may say, in an almost antiquated way, that we are still all infected by original sin. That may sound strange. What I mean is this: We still are greedy to be God. We covet that which does not belong to us. Created in God’s image isn’t good enough for us. We want to be all-powerful, all-controlling, all-knowing, worshipped by everyone and in that endeavor to which we’ve religiously committed ourselves, we are doomed. Originally, we were good enough,—pronounced “good” by God. But that wasn’t good enough for us. We didn’t want to be good; we wanted to be God.

In our insisting on taking the lead we have lost our way. We’ve placed on ourselves a burden too heavy to carry. We have brought upon ourselves the Wrath, the consequences of our attempt to play God. Self-doubt is a symptom of our masquerade. All of this is tragic. But the Bible has good news: Jesus came to relieve us of our self-imposed burden. He invites us to be restored, to lay down our too-heavy burden and to follow Him whose burden is light. He invites us to have confidence in God instead of our relying on self for what only God can supply. That then will be our justification, our salvation. That will free us to be the children of God we were intended to be and we have all we need to be such children. It is in faithing the children we are rather than in trying to be the God we are not that we can, for a while and from time to time, escape the gnawing self-doubts, fears, and guilt of the faker.

Psychologically we know that self-esteem begins to be learned at a very early age—maybe as early as one year. Our ideas of the expectations of significant others and of their value judgments of us are internalized and early on are fairly well-fixed. That’s why so much of what we experience as our core self is so very familiar to us, we seem never to have been otherwise. As we grow up, we all begin to be aware of discrepancies between what we believe ourselves “really” to be and “really” able to do on the one hand and what we believe we are expected to be and to do on the other. These gaps between our perceived self and what we believe to be our ideal self are what we have in mind when we are aware of our negative self-images. Whenever we aim at the ideal, which is by definition perfection and which cannot possibly be translated

unflawed into the here and now, we unwittingly set ourselves up for failure and, in effect, we reinforce our idea that we are not good enough, not effective enough. After all, we ordered ourselves to achieve perfection and we judge that we have failed to achieve perfection and are therefore good for nothing. We blame ourselves in order to try to be in control of a situation we experience is already out of control. We thereby further reinforce our sense of inadequacy, impotency and frustration.

But why did we think we could achieve perfection? We didn't think that. We thought we *should* achieve perfection. But why did we think we should? Well some psychologists would say that others have reinforced perfectionistic goals for us all our lives and we've internalized these expectations. We've noted that some people have indeed done this but we must add that people have not always done this in every case. At any rate, why did we buy such demand in any case?

Psychodynamically speaking, self-esteem is a state of being on good or bad terms with one's superego or conscience. But—what if this is just a modern way to obfuscate the more radical assessment that self-esteem is a state of being on good or bad terms with the Law of God written in the heart of everybody, as the Apostle Paul said. Maybe our sense of inferiority and our defensive superiority posturing also has to do with that unshakable sense that “something is wrong” that William James observed and that Campbell Morgan (following Paul) interpreted as evidence of our primal rebellion against our source in God. If that is the case, it may explain why psychotherapists find it so very difficult if not impossible to finally get rid of the recurrent self-doubts in their clients. Might the all-pervasive human experience of beliefs of inadequacy and the all-too destructive effects of defensiveness and counter-attack be evidence of the grandest cover-up of all time? Might it all be evidence that we all know that somehow we are guilty, in some fundamental way? Perhaps every display of self-righteousness, every instance of irrational jealousy, is a clue that we know profoundly that we are, in theological language, sinners pretending to be otherwise.

Let's face it, our self-doubts about our *autonomy* are *realistic*. We are not our own creations. And neither is anything else, no matter how it seems. But isn't our attempt to be our own creation itself suspect? Isn't it a rather silly confusion of identity? Such self-doubt is a hint of our attempt at self-deification. Our self-doubts about our *sufficiency* are *realistic*, too. We cannot control all that we may want to control. And neither can anyone else, no matter how it seems. But isn't our attempt to have such power itself suspect? Isn't it a rather silly confusion of identity? Such self-doubt is a hint of our attempt at self-deification.

In spite of all our attempts to pretend otherwise, we have no excuse. We know very well that we are not who we try to be and we know we cannot do what we try to do. And trying to be who we are not, trying to do what we cannot, we believe that we are not who we should be and are trying to do what we should not be trying to do. We have a suspicion that we're stark naked and we're trying to pretend either that we don't notice it or that it's the fashion.

Not satisfied with our God-given significance—created in the very image of God—human beings have tried and failed to become God's replacement. But God is not Montague to our Capulet; Hatfield to our McCoy. In our efforts at wrenching ourselves away from our only Source, *est*-like to be our own creators, we become lost and pretend we've “got it.” Whether the

“queen” of St. Tropez or the “king” of Tyre (Ezek 28:2, 9), we must recognize that we are all earthlings, not God.

We tried to make ourselves God and failed. God became one of us and turned our failure into redemption. God became a human being to restore what was lost—to put us into Christ and Christ into us. What we have done caused our death and worldwide destruction. But what God did was to come to us and, through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, to reconcile us and the world to God. As the writer of I John puts it: “We have already been made children of God. It has not yet been disclosed what we shall be. But we know that when Christ shall appear again, we shall be like Christ.” [I John 3:2] Here we have, in the words of New Testament scholar F. F. Bruce, “the accomplishment of God’s eternal purpose concerning man.” We have here what Bruce calls God’s “intention of bringing into existence beings like Himself, as like Himself as it is possible for creatures to be like their Creator.” [25]

After his conversion on the Damascus Road, Paul realized that he had been engaged in a self-serving lifelong struggle to be good enough for God. Only that, he had thought, would have been good enough for Paul. As a Pharisee, trying to observe every bit of the oral and written laws of the Jews, Paul had been an extremely religious man. But his religion, his very attempt to be so religious, was exactly what was fouling up his meeting of his greatest need. He needed fellowship with God and yet his religiosity continued to separate him from that fellowship. All of his efforts perfectionism only made him sense how very imperfect he was, how very far short he fell from what he imagined to be what God expected of him.

After his conversion, Paul remembered all those years he tried to justify himself through religionism—all the excuses, all the remorse, all the resolutions to change, all the cover-up and hypocrisy, all the duplicity, all the pretending, all the hostility, all the self-loathing, all the self-righteousness aimed at faking it—wasted and of no account. Worse than wasted. He had tried to put God in his debt and that was a killer. He just fell deeper and deeper under the power of sin itself. It was like quicksand, the more Paul struggled to free himself, the deeper he sank. Trying to earn release had only shown him how helpless he really was. Paul had tried to gain a way out “the old-fashioned way,” he’d tried to “earn it.” But “the old-fashioned way” wasn’t good enough. It never is. The Apostle discovered that it was by the “New Way,” the New Covenant in Christ’s blood, that there was full release from the deadly consequences of sin. Of course, in a most basic sense, this “new” way was the “old” way of faithing that characterized the long line of fathers the writer of Hebrews recalls, but as is so often the case, the “old” way gets lost in the bureaucracy of self-righteousness that organized religion tends to become. Casting himself on the mercy of God was the only way out of Paul’s mess. The person who used to struggle for self-justification was now dead in Christ. The person who used to spin his wheels is dead. Now the person who never measured up measures up in the One Who measures up for us all and for all time and eternity. **WE ARE FREE TO STOP EVEN TRYING TO MEASURE UP.** We’ll only dig ourselves deeper into disobedience and despair trying to measure up. Christ has already measured up for us—at awful cost—and He continues to measure up for us—living His life through us every day. How do we know this? We know this by faithing. We rely on it to be the case; we trust God that it is so.

The root of our anxiety, our refusal to faith in the providence of God while trying to secure ourselves psychologically, economically, socially, sexually, legislatively, and even religiously or theologically, is beyond our ability to destroy but it is not beyond the refining fire of Christ's kingdom and His righteous justice. [Cf Matt 6:25-34] The greatest irony of all time is that all of our misery arose one day in our self-destructive attempts to play God and all of our misery will one day cease in God's gift of our fulfillment in Him. We who, like our first parents, though created in the image of God, nonetheless grasped perversely to be like God, are promised that in Christ, one day we shall be gifted with the very likeness of Christ. And the gift of God to us came by way of Christ's not grasping on to the equality with God—even though He was the Co-Eternal One—but by nonetheless humbling Himself as a Servant.

Paul's favorite term for our Christian reality is that we are "in Christ." He uses the expression over 160 times in his letters. It is "in Christ" that God reconciled the world [II Cor 5:19]. "In Christ" there is no condemnation [Rom 8:11]. "In Christ" there are now no sociological, cultural, or sexual distinctions—including homosexuality and heterosexuality—that are of any theological significance whatsoever [Gal 3:28].

It is sad how very lightly most Christians take the great reality of our being "in Christ." As Senate chaplain Richard Halverson sees it, it is "a fundamental theme in the Bible that is just not taken seriously at all" today. His own anti-gay pronouncements indicate that he himself still injects a homosexual exception clause to the theological insignificance of homosexuality in Galatians 3. [26] Turn-of-the-century pastor of Carr's Lane congregation, Birmingham, John Henry Jowett (pastor of Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, New York City, 1911-18) had this to say of our being "in Christ." In his sermon, "The Glory of the Gospel," Jowett said: "It is declared that I, a poor struggling, self-wasted sinner, may by faith be so identified with Christ, that Christ and I become as 'one.' That is no ingenious phrase, the vehicle of a pious but fruitless fancy. It is the expression of a gospel. ... An unspeakably fruitful identity with Christ, the mystic oneness of the believing race in the risen Lord! This is the possible heritage of all, made possible to all by the Saviour's atoning death." [27] The Oxford Anglican Bible teacher, W. H. Griffith Thomas (a co-founder of Dallas Seminary), put it this way: "... at every point Christ and the believer are identified. When our Lord was circumcised, we were circumcised with Him; when our Lord died, we died with Him; ... when He rose, we were raised." [28] New Testament textual scholar B. F. Westcott, said: "If once we realize what these words 'we are in Christ' mean, we shall know that beneath the surface of life lie depths which we cannot fathom, full alike of mystery and hope." [29]

In conclusion, let me say that it is not for us to judge. It is for us to receive the judgment of God.

Why do we who so quickly judge as inferior that which we see of ourselves, not just as quickly judge as inferior our judgment itself? Why do we who judge ourselves inferior, not judge our judgment likewise? For that which we see of ourselves is far from the whole story. We have such a biased view, such a partial view. Our sight is blocked by a self-absorbed myopia. We arrive at our self-judgments by contrasting our perceived selves against our ideal selves—fantasies which don't really exist except in our unfulfilled designs. But our judgments are subject to empirical test and we have actual histories of inferior judging. We'd be wise to doubt some of our self-doubts.

Why do we who so quickly judge as inferior that which we see of ourselves not just as quickly hear and receive the judgment of the One who is beyond all inferiority—the Judge of all the earth, who judges with power and knowledge and wisdom and justice, but above all with mercy.

By relying on God's Word we can have something of a vision of ourselves as we truly are—beyond illusion: created in the image of God, yet rebellious and thankless and self-absorbed, yet reconciled to God by faith in Christ and indwelt by God [I John 4:12], chosen to dwell with God forevermore.

We are what we are, but what we now seem is an illusion, “seen through a glass darkly,” as Paul put it. We spend such an inordinate effort fooling around with our selfish preoccupation with what we sense as falling short of our own standards of good looks and material possessions that we utterly fall short of God's standard which is love owed even to our enemies.

But we need not be defensive. Because of the mercy of God we can admit our sins in the embrace of a God who created us for Himself and Who forgives forever each of Her children.

The irony of illusion in our walking by sight instead of by trust is captured in the poetry of Frederick William Faber in these lines: “So all the while I thought myself Homeless, forlorn and weary, Missing my joy, I walked the earth, Myself God's sanctuary.”

How might we live daily with such faithing in God's promise rather than in our own feeble feelings and poor sight? Trust God to be God with whoever and whatever we see or don't see of ourselves. Perhaps no Christian has summed up our instruction so well as did Oswald Chambers when he said: “Transact business on the grounds of the Redemption and then leave yourself resolutely alone.” [30]

As we've noted, one Christian who did not find it easy to leave himself alone was the poet William Cowper. All his life he suffered from dark depression and a terrible sense that he had been rejected by God. He lived with his eyes wide open to the mercies of God for others but had trouble seeing God's mercies to himself. His many letters about this are heart-breaking. Even so, at times he *was* able to write beautiful expressions of God's mercy to himself, though more often, to all the rest of the world. In 1772 he penned the hymn for which he is best remembered by American Christians:

There is a fountain filled with blood Drawn from Emmanuel's veins;

And sinners, plunged beneath that flood, Lose all their guilty stains.

The dying thief rejoiced to see That fountain in his day;

And there have I, as vile as he. Washed all my sins away.

Dear dying Lamb, Thy precious blood Shall never lose its power

Till all the ransomed Church of God Be saved, to sin no more.

E'er since by faith I saw the stream Thy flowing wounds supply,
Redeeming love has been my theme, And shall be till I die.
Then in a nobler, sweeter song I'll sing Thy power to save,
When this poor lisping, stammering tongue Lies silent in the grave.

The poet's "poor lisping, stammering tongue" has been silent in the grave for 185 years, but during all of that time, Christians have been singing Cowper's words of his God's "Redeeming love." But Cowper lived with his terrible depression for almost two decades after composing this hymn. He thought he had committed an unpardonable sin, in a moment, years before. Nothing seemed to relieve his dread of this but opium. "If I endeavor to pray," he wrote, "I get my answer in a double portion of misery. My petitions, therefore, are reduced to three words, and those not very often repeated—'God, have mercy.'" [31] His letters often note that "The day hardly ever comes in which I do not utter a wish that I had never been born." [32] In perhaps his saddest of many letters to his cousin, Lady Hesketh, he wrote on February 19, 1796 what I submit is the very saddest line a man can ever write: "All my themes of misery may be summed in one word,—He who made me regrets that ever He did. Many years have passed since I learned this terrible truth from Himself, and the interval has been spent accordingly." [33] How tragic that Cowper could not counter this notion of fear with the promise of the God who once had indeed regretted having made humankind and sent the flood but then who made an oath, "Never again!" to destroy us and who reminds us of the covenant in the rare and surprising sighting of the rainbow. [Gen 6:6-9:17] Cowper endured four more years of the misery he had described many years before as being "fed with judgment, in a fleshly tomb ... buried above ground."

On March 20, 1799 Cowper wrote his last poem. It is entitled "The Castaway" and describes a shipwreck with a sailor, washed overboard, drowning alone, out of reach of all help. The final verse contrasts this sailor's fate with his own:

No voice divine the storm allay'd,
No light propitious shone,
When, snatch'd from all effectual aid,
We perish'd, each alone:
But I beneath a rougher sea,
And whelm'd in deeper gulfs than he.

Though Cowper could not leave himself alone with the tender mercies of God, and suffered as a result, his biographer writes the following account of the poet's death at 5 in the afternoon, April 25, 1800 in East Dereham, Norfolk. Cowper "expired so peacefully that, of the five persons who were standing at the foot and the side of the bed, no one perceived the moment of his departure. ... From that moment till the coffin was closed, the expression with which his countenance had settled, was that of calmness and composure, mingled, as it were, with holy surprise." [34]

It could have been to Cowper that C. S. Lewis penned the following words, a century and a half after Cowper's "holy surprise:" "All your life an unattainable ecstasy has hovered just beyond the grasp of your consciousness. The day is coming when you will wake to find, beyond all hope, that you have attained it." [35] As Paul wrote: "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love Him." [I Cor 2:9]

Cowper's "holy surprise" seems to have so clearly fulfilled his own deep faithing in God, professed a quarter century before his death—and after he had thought on the basis of his feelings of dread that he was forever lost:

God moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform;
He plants His footsteps in the sea, And rides upon the storm.
Deep in unfathomable mines Of never-failing skill
He treasures up His bright designs, And works His sovereign will.
Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take; The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy, and shall break In blessings on your head.
Judge not the Lord by feeble sense, But trust Him for His grace;
Behind a frowning providence He hides a smiling face.
His purposes will ripen fast, Unfolding every hour;
The bud may have a bitter taste, But sweet will be the flower.
Blind unbelief is sure to err, And scan His work in vain;
God is His own Interpreter, And He will make it plain.

REFERENCES

1. Jerry Herman, *La Cage aux Folles: the Broadway Musical* (New York: LaCage Co., 1983).
2. G. Campbell Morgan, *Christian Principles* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1908), pp. 99f.
3. Cf. e.g.: K. Moore and S. Stoner, "Adolescent self-reports and religiosity," *Psychological Reports*, vol. 41, 1977, pp. 55f. C. B. Smith, A. J. Weigert, and D. L. Thomas, "Self-esteem and religiosity: An analysis of Catholic adolescents from five cultures," *Journal for the Study of Religion*, vol. 18, 1979, pp. 51ff. G. Gurin, J. Veroff and S. Field, *Americans View their Mental Health* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960). E. W. McAllister, "The self-concept structure of evangelical/fundamentalist ministers," *Journal of Psychology and Christianity*, vol. 1, 1982, pp. 14ff.

4. Cf. e.g.: E. L. Cowen, "The negative concept as a personality measure," *Journal of Consulting Psychology*, vol. 18, 1954, pp. 138ff. R. M. Tipton, B. M. Harrison, and J. Mahoney, "Faith and locus of control," *Psychological Reports*, vol. 46, 1980, pp. 1151ff.

5. *Newsweek*, August 5, 1985, p. 63.

6. Cf. e.g.: P. A. Mauger, "Specialized personality inventories for Christians?," Paper presented at the Conference of Research in Mental Health and Religious Behavior, January 1976. C. B. Dodrill, "Personality differences between Christian and secular college students," *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, vol. 4, no. 2, 1976, pp. 152ff. M. E. Heintzelman and L. A. Fehr, "Relationship between religious orthodoxy and three personality variables," *Psychological Reports*, vol. 38, 1976, pp. 756.

7. David Aycock, "Self-esteem and the Christian: Why don't the new creatures like themselves?" Paper presented at the annual convention of the Christian Association for Psychological Studies, April, 1985.

8. *Time*, September 2, 1985, p. 61.

9. Robert Southey, *The Life of William Cowper* (Boston: Phillips, Samson and Co., 1858) vol. 1, p. 95.

10. George Lawton, *Within the Rock of Ages: The Life and Work of Augustus Montague Toplady* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 1983), p. 163.

11. *Ibid.*

12. Toplady believed that all beasts and birds had "souls, truly and properly so called" [cf. Lawton, *op.cit.*, p. 136]. At the scene of a bull baiting outside the window of the inn where Toplady was visiting with John Newton and William Bull at Newport Pagnall in 1778 (the year of Toplady's death) Toplady remarked: "Who could bear to see that sight if there were not to be some compensation for these poor suffering animals in a future state?" Bull joked: "I certainly hope that all the Bulls will go to heaven; but do you think this will be the case with all the animal creation?" "Yes," replied [the Calvinist] Toplady, with great emphasis, "all, all!" [Thomas Wright, *Augustus M. Toplady* (London: Farncombe and Son, 1911), p. 213]

13. Lawton, *op.cit.*, p. 69.

14. David L. Edwards, *Christian England: From the 18th Century to the First World War*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), p. 57.

15. Frank Baker, *The Methodist Pilgrim in England* (Rutland, VT: Academy Books, 1976), p. 21.

16. Arthur Paul Davis, *Isaac Watts: His Life and Works* (Privately printed doctoral dissertation, Columbia University, 1943), p. 64.
17. Southey, op.cit., vol. 1, p. 88.
18. Kenneth W. Osbeck, *101 Hymn Stories* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1982), p. 52.
19. Arnold Dallimore, *Spurgeon* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984), pp. 180f.
20. Ibid., p. 186.
21. Phillips Brooks, "Whole Views of Life," *Sermons: Sixth Series* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1893) pp. 215f.
22. Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1947 [1886]), p. 231.
23. Martin Luther, *Romans* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1954), p. 112.
24. C. H. Spurgeon's *Autobiography Compiled from his diary, letters and records by his Wife*, vol. 1, (London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1899), p. 158.
25. F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970) pp. 85f.
26. Richard C. Halverson, *Preaching Today* (Carol Stream, IL: Leadership, n.d.).
27. John Henry Jowett, *Apostolic Optimism* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, n.d.), p. 184.
28. W. H. Griffith Thomas, *Studies in Colossians and Philemon* [edited by his daughter, Winifred Gillespie] (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1973), p. 90
29. B. F. Westcott, *St. Paul's Epistle of the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1952 [1906]) p. 186.
30. Cited by Eugenia Price, *Leave Yourself Alone* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), p. 17.
31. Southey, op.cit., vol. 2, p. 290.
32. Ibid., e.g. vol. 2, p. 284; p. 333.
33. Ibid., p. 319.
34. Ibid., p. 343.
35. C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (London: Collins, 1957), p. 136.