

Dobson Dead Wrong about Self-Esteem*

Self-esteem is a high priority for many professing Christians, who work hard to develop self-esteem in themselves and in their children. They assume that increasing self-esteem is right and good—even an absolute necessity! Dr. James Dobson has enthusiastically touted self-esteem through his books and his Focus on the Family radio program and other ministry efforts. Because he professes Christianity and promotes family values, many people assume that Dobson’s teachings on self-esteem are Biblical, but they can be found nowhere in the Bible unless Scripture is bent to fit.

The bad news concerning Dobson’s self-esteem teachings is that his books promoting such teachings have sky rocketed in sales. This is balanced, however, by the good news coming from continued research on self-esteem. Research once again indicates that critics like Martin and Deidre Bobgan are correct about self-esteem and Dobson is dead wrong! (See *Prophets of PsychoHeresy II*). More bad news, however, is that the research results have not reversed the incorrect assumptions about self-esteem in the minds of many professing Christians, and the research has not dampened the sales of Dobson’s self-esteem books.

In *Prophets of PsychoHeresy II* (reissued as *James Dobson’s Gospel of Self-Esteem & Psychology*), the Bobgans quoted extensive research to document Dobson’s erroneous assumptions and recommendations regarding self-esteem. One of the chapters reported on California’s expenditure of \$735,000 to research the subject of self-esteem in preparation for promoting it throughout the state. The result of this expensive effort was published in a book titled *The Social Importance of Self-Esteem*.

Dr. Neil Smelzer, the professor hired to summarize the research, admits: “One of the disappointing aspects of every chapter in this volume ... is how low the associations between self-esteem and its consequences are in research to date.” He also says:

“The authors who have assessed the state-of-the-art knowledge of factors important in the genesis of many social problems have been unable to uncover many causally valid findings relating to that genesis—and they have therefore been correspondingly unable to come up with systematic statements relating to cure or prevention.”

After examining the research in *The Social Importance of Self-Esteem*, David L. Kirk, syndicated writer for the San Francisco Examiner, says it more bluntly: “There is precious little evidence that self-esteem is the cause of our social ills.” He continues:

“Those social scientists looked hard ... but they could detect essentially no cause-and-effect link between self-esteem and problematic behavior, whether it’s teen pregnancy, drug use or child abuse.”

John Leo’s article titled “Damn, I’m Good” (*US News & World Report*, 5/18/98) followed his examination of the research on self-esteem. Leo says:

“The self-esteem movement is one of the marvels of our time. It goes on and on, even though its assumptions are wrong and its basic premises have been discredited by a great deal of research. Like a monster in the last 10 minutes of a horror movie, it has enough fatal wounds to stop a platoon. But it keeps stumbling on, seeming not to notice.”

* Excerpted and/or adapted from the July-August 1998, *PsychoHeresy Awareness Letter*.

A *New York Times* article quotes Albert Bandura, a psychology professor at Stanford, as saying that “self-esteem affects neither personal goals nor performance.”

Yes, Dobson is dead wrong about self-esteem from both a Biblical and research perspective. However, in spite of all the research that continues to contradict Dobson’s position on self-esteem, his books continue to be popular. Moreover, because he has combined the psychology of self-esteem with the Bible, many will have a difficult time giving it up. It’s part of their faith and no amount of research to the contrary will dissuade them.

In the midst of all the psychological nonsense Dobson has brought into the church, there is still hope. The good news is that God’s Word is true and we can depend on Him, who by His “divine power hath given unto us all things that pertain unto life and godliness, through the knowledge of him that hath called us to glory and virtue: whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises: that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust” (2 Peter 1:3,4).

One need not add self-esteem from the psychological wisdom of the world. God Himself provides what is needed to live the Christian life—knowledge, understanding, wisdom, and power that will never be found in self-esteem or any other addition from psychology.

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