

Models for Understanding Healthy, Biblical Self-Love

Author Note

Daniel G. Sinclair

CT540: Moral Theology

Masters in Theology Program

Williamson College

Contact: dgsinclair@gmail.com

Contents

Contents 2

1 Introduction 4

 1.1 Defining an ethic of self-love..... 4

 1.2 Defining Self: singular or multi-personal 5

2 First Principles of Biblical Self-Love..... 5

 2.1 Under the auspices of subordination to God 6

 2.1.1 A Normative View of Self 6

 2.1.2 The Existence of the New Self..... 6

 2.1.3 A voice of love and instruction 7

 2.2 As a necessary precursor for love of neighbor 7

 2.3 As a rule of parity for love of neighbor..... 8

 2.4 As an end, not a means..... 8

 2.5 As a true relationship, not merely stewardship 9

 2.5.1 Multiple Selves in Scripture 9

 2.5.2 Multiple Selves in Psychology 10

 2.5.3 Multiple Selves in Experience..... 10

 2.6 Summary of Principles of Self-Love..... 11

3 Models for Understanding Self-Love 11

 3.1 A Continuum View 11

 3.1.1 Illness-Wellness Continuum 12

3.1.2 Judgement-Mercy-Grace Continuum..... 12

3.1.3 A Self-Love Continuum 13

3.2 Biblical Foundationalism 13

3.2.1 Grace Foundationalism 13

3.2.2 Self-love Foundationalism 14

3.3 Developmental Modeling..... 14

3.3.1 Erickson: Self-concept precedes intimacy 15

3.3.2 The Five Selves Model: Love of the Created Self 16

4 Objections..... 17

4.1 Whence self-denial? 17

4.2 How do we distinguish between healthy and unhealthy self-love? 18

4.3 How can we recognize and honor the created self if it is corrupted?..... 18

4.4 Can we get self-esteem merely from God’s love? 19

4.5 Didn’t Paul merely take a neutral, not radically positive view in Romans 12? .. 19

4.6 Aren’t personality tests just an exercise in self-absorption?..... 20

5 Conclusion 21

6 References 21

1 Introduction

In Evangelical circles, *self-love* is an idea and practice often viewed with suspicion, if not outright hostility, often being equated with *selfishness*. Little distinction is made between an unhealthy self-focus and a healthy, biblical self-love. Our biblical and practical need for a healthy self-concept is often poorly addressed by a redirection towards a focus on God and our redeemed, or new self “in Christ” (Galatians 3:26-38). This a misdirection *away* from our created self rather than a helpful response. In this paper, I present a theology of healthy self-love based on the two “greatest commandments” of love for God, self, and others. Second, I present three theological models for understanding self-love; the *continuum*, *foundational*, and *human development* models. Included in the latter is an original “5-Selves” developmental model for understanding the importance and role of loving our *created* self, a.k.a. a *healthy self-love*. Lastly, I address objections, including discussions of *self-denial*, *sin’s corruption of the created self*, *distinguishing healthy and unhealthy self-love*, *God’s place in restoring our attitude towards self*, and *the popularity of personality tests and other tools of self-understanding*.

1.1 Defining an ethic of self-love

As an *ought* or *duty*, self-love might be grounded in Jesus’ second greatest commandment to love neighbor as self. However, this is tenuous because in the phrase, “love your neighbor as yourself,” self-love is not presented as an imperative, but at best as an assumption of natural law (NL). As such, even though we may seek direct commands for self-love in scripture, the bulk of the ethical argument for self-love must be based on NL and not divine command (DC). Self-love, however, may also be viewed as supported by a virtue ethic (VE) in that self-love is seen as a virtue, an end in itself that leads to the ability to love others. We will see VE appear in both our applications of Kant and Erickson.

1.2 Defining Self: singular or multi-personal

To support a relational aspect for self-love, I must posit multiple selves. This creates a riddle that must be solved – are humans multi-personal, similar to the triune God, or at least bi-personal? If so, what makes up these persons, and how distinct are they? In scripture, philosophy, psychology, and individual experience, there is some evidence for multiple selves in activities such as *inner dialogue* and *executive brain function*, but even so, most of these disciplines present the “self” as a singular consciousness (pathologies like schizophrenia aside). Do we have multiple *loci* of our selves, or do we merely have multiple *perspectives* of a unified self?

A meaningful and congruent multi-personal model can be assembled from (a) the biblical descriptions of our *created*, *fallen*, and *recreated* selves (Stott, 1986, p. 285), inner dialogue, and the executive functions of directing our minds and wills, (b) the psychological elucidation of functional selves in such models as the tripersonal *Transactional Analysis* (parent-self, adult-self, child-self) and other developmental models, and (c) our own experience of inner dialogue. I propose that at least a two-self model may be adopted, where the self is not a solitary persona, and where multiple selves do not violate the unity of the individual. This allows for relational love between *our executive or adult selves* and our *inner or child selves* as persons. Additional selves, such as the parent self of TA or those of the 5 Selves model below may also be viewed as unique loci of personality, yet part of a unified whole.

2 First Principles of Biblical Self-Love

Jesus replied: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself. (Matt. 22:37-39, NIV)

2.1 Under the auspices of subordination to God

A relationship of intimacy with and subordination to God provides a protective framework under which a developing healthy self-love can safely flourish. It provides (a) a blueprint for what is normative, (b) deliverance from the power of sin and power to pursue transformative truth, and (c) divine instruction and love. Taken together, these benefits help us avoid misidentifying our true selves, put off our false selves mired in sin, and discover and develop our inner selves with the intimate aid of the Creator of those selves.

2.1.1 *A Normative View of Self*

The noetic effects of sin and the reality of a fallen self, known biblically as our “old self, which belongs to [our] former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires” (Ephesians 4:22), can make it hard to distinguish our “true,” created self. Thankfully, we have the scriptures which describe God’s designs and *telos* for mankind. The scriptural descriptions of the uncorrupted person help us distinguish what is true about such topics as sexual orientation v. perversion, personality vs. character faults, and right actions and intent vs. sinful actions and intents which we may be tempted to excuse as “natural.”

2.1.2 *The Existence of the New Self*

As we seek to discover our *created* self, regeneration gives us new spiritual insight, as well as a “new self” to put on. With the Holy Spirit within us, we have the ability to see and put off the false self in a way that the unregenerate person can not. Though seeking the potential of the created self is sometimes powerfully accomplished by the human potential movement without the Spirit or the new self, the absence of these safeguards means a greatly reduced ability to proceed without idolizing the self or worse, following demonic “spirit guides.” In addition to greater *awareness* of sin and truth, the presence of the new, redeemed self also gives us *motivation* and *power* to leave the false self behind.

2.1.3 A voice of love and instruction

Modern psychology has established that our sense of self is forged within our relationships, especially with our primary caretakers as children.¹ When healing and re-forming a healthy sense of self, we need more than just our own self-love - we require the love of *another*, a loving parent. God is this perfect loving parent (see Matthew 7:11). Without this, we are limited to “reparenting” ourselves, which I contend (partly through experience) is an order of magnitude inferior to being reparented by God.² Additionally, the guidance and encouragement of God can help ensure a meaningful *sequence* to our healing, and can be a real hedge against deception and discouragement.

2.2 As a necessary precursor for love of neighbor

Jesus’ saying may imply a sequential priority between self- and other-love. Psychology and experience admit that if we despise ourselves, we will certainly treat our neighbor in the same fashion, and any love we offer may not come from wholeness but from the need for self-worth, approval or reciprocity. Giving love to others atop ignorance or loathing of one’s self may actually be an unhealthy *abuse* of the self, like chewing on a bad tooth or whoring one’s self for approval or duty:

The idea expressed in the Biblical “Love thy neighbor as thyself!” implies that respect for one’s own integrity and uniqueness, love for and understanding of one’s own self cannot be separated from respect and love and understanding for another individual. The love for my own self is inseparably connected with the

¹ The idea that our sense of self is forged in relationship with our primary caretakers is part of the foundation of Object Relations Therapy (ORT), where the relationship with the therapist is the primary method of healing the self-concept, in place of the earlier parents (Cashdan, 1988; Erikson, 1993).

² Research has been done correlating ORT with our perception of God and the role of God as the primary object of relationship in healing (McDargh, 1983; Parker, 2008; Rizzuto, 1974)

love for any other being....If an individual is able to love productively, he loves himself too; if he can love *only* others, he cannot love at all. (Fromm et al., 1989, pp. 53–54)

2.3 As a rule of parity for love of neighbor

Not only is healthy self-love a necessary precursor to a healthy love of others, it may also set a limit on how much we may truly be able to love others. Here, Jesus is *requiring* us to love others to the same extent we love ourselves, and he may also be admitting that we are unable to go *beyond* that, and that he therefore does not require that (we will address self-denial and “considering others as more important than ourselves” later). Jesus’ use of the word “as” or “in the same manner” indicates at least a general rule of parity; a rule of thumb, or perhaps a minimum requirement and/or maximum threshold. Meister Eckhart, the 13th-century German theologian and mystic, stated this principle of parity in this way:

If you love yourself, you love everybody else as you do yourself. As long as you love another person less than you love yourself, you will not really succeed in loving yourself, but if you love all alike, including yourself, you will love them as one person and that person is both God and man. Thus he is a great righteous person who, loving himself, loves all people equally. (Eckhart, 1941, p. 204)

2.4 As an end, not a means

We must be careful not to assume that because self-love is a necessary precursor to other-love, that self-love is merely a means to the end of loving others. As Kant intoned, true love for persons must be an end in itself to be ethical. Love for our own person must be more than a means to an end. However, it must also not be seen as the ultimate end, and Jesus’ inclusion of love of others, in subordination to the ultimate end of loving God, keeps the end of true self-love from being a complete and final goal.

2.5 As a true relationship, not merely stewardship

Self-love is not distinguished in the two greatest commandments in any other way than the objects of their love (God, self, others).³ Therefore all must involve love of a *person*, and so self-love must be more than mere stewardship of ourselves as an inanimate resource. Noted psychologist Eric Fromm describes the necessary attributes of true love as *care, responsibility, respect, and knowledge* of another (Fromm et al., 1989, p. 24). These are not possible if our love for self is impersonal:

The desire to know all of man, his innermost secret...can never be fulfilled in knowledge of the ordinary kind, in knowledge only of thought....It is [fulfilled in] the daring plunge into the experience of union. (Fromm et al., 1989, pp. 28–29)

Love always involves the union of at least two beings, and in the case of self-love, we must appeal to the existence of many selves. We therefore now turn to the evidence of multiple selves in scripture, psychology, and our own experience.

2.5.1 Multiple Selves in Scripture

One biblical evidence of multiple selves is seen in the *inner dialog* of David, recorded in both Psalm 42:5,11 and 43:5:

Why, my soul, are you so dejected? Why are you in such turmoil? Put your hope in God, for I will still praise him, my Savior and my God. (Psalm 42:5)

Additionally, Psalm 4:4 is often interpreted as an inner dialogue; “commune *with* your heart on your bed,” not just “meditate *within* your heart.” The Apostle Paul’s inner struggle between the

³ A common aphorism in Christian circles is that “JOY comes from putting Jesus first, Others second, and Yourself last.” Though this seems congruent with such concepts as self-denial and considering others more highly than ourselves (Phi. 2:3), it may actually present an unhealthy sequence that helps perpetuate low self regard.

old and new man, as well as the fact that he is an external observer of this dynamic in Romans 7 (as well as Colossians 3:10, Ephesians 4:24), is another support for multiple selves in scripture, or at least for an executive self operating on and above the self.

2.5.2 *Multiple Selves in Psychology*

The psychological model named *Transactional Analysis* (TA) posits that we have three selves – an internalized *parent* self, an *adult* self, and a *child* self. To heal the inner child (our “true self”), TA asks us to change our “parent tapes” (the internalized words of approval and disapproval we received as children), thereby aiding in healing our self-concept (Moroney, 1989).⁴ This “reparenting” can be effective and demands that we interact with our various selves. Note that by adding God as the additional or primary “parent” voice, we may provide extra, if not better healing in this modality, though progress has been shown in merely “reparenting one’s self.” TA is amenable to use in healing our “inner child,” as is Erickson’s model of psychosocial development (Bradshaw, 1990; Erikson, 1993). This search for the “true” self, or “created” self is the subject of so many self-help books, both Christian and non, that it’s nearly a byword (e.g. Palmer, 1999).

2.5.3 *Multiple Selves in Experience*

As with the problem of evil, there may be a logical and exegetical case made for the existence of many interacting selves within us, but there is also a strong evidential argument. The fact that we can take an abstract, executive view of ourselves, and converse within ourselves is a common, if not universal experience supporting the multi-self thesis.

⁴ It is interesting to note that Frame’s triperspectivalism easily matches the TA model, where the parent is the normative view, the adult is the situational, and the child is the existential (Frame, 2017). This may lend credence to the TA model.

2.6 Summary of Principles of Self-Love

Jesus' short summation of the law in two distinct, prioritized rules of love presents a meaningful framework for self-love. Under the safeguards of the primacy of God, healthy self-love may flourish. It is a prerequisite for love of neighbor and must be employed through the rule of parity – that our love of others must not outstrip our care for ourselves, lest we end up abusing ourselves and caring for others from unhealthy, if not sinful motivations such as a need for approval or avoiding guilt, or even avoiding our own pain and dysfunction. Love itself requires a relationship with a true “other,” and so self-love must be an end, not merely a means to loving others, and must involve our multiple “selves.” These principles provide some answers to how and why we must engage in self-love, but how are we to understand the definition of self and self-love within a biblical framework, especially in relation to other possible “selves” that may exist, such as our “fallen” or “false” self? How does this relate to Paul’s “old” and “new” selves, and our wrestling with putting on this new self (Ephesians 2:24, Colossians 3:10)?

3 Models for Understanding Self-Love

Biblical models for understanding and prioritizing self-love include the *continuum*, *foundationalist*, and *developmental* models.

3.1 A Continuum Model

A spectrum of values for an attribute may be described on a continuum, and it is possible to view self-love on a spectrum. But for perspective, let us first examine two other helpful continuum models – the *illness-wellness continuum* and the *judgment-mercy-grace continuum*. We can then propose a *self-love continuum* and argue that we must aim for the top of the continuum, not the middle or bottom.

3.1.1 Illness-Wellness Continuum

The *Illness-Wellness Continuum* summarized in Figure 1 has revolutionized modern medicine by emphasizing that healthcare must do more than get us to a *neutral* position of being not-sick, but to a *positive* wellness that moves us far from sickness to a resilient position with margin (Travis & Ryan, 2004).

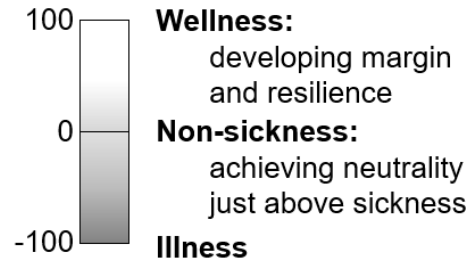


Figure 1: Simplified Illness-Wellness Continuum

3.1.2 Judgement-Mercy-Grace Continuum

The *illness-wellness continuum* is an extra-biblical model, but there is a surprisingly similar model in the *judgment-mercy-grace* model (Figure 2). As commonly understood, God’s mercy in salvation moves us from a *negative* position of guilt to a *neutral* state of forgiveness (not getting the punishment we deserve), while God’s grace moves us to a *positive* position (receiving the many gifts of God that we do *not* deserve).

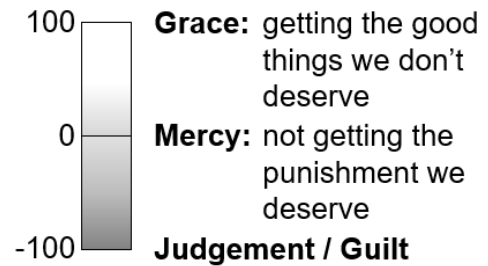


Figure 2: The Judgement-Mercy-Grace Continuum

This grace-based model, however, brings up some alarming possibilities – if we move from a place of mere forgiveness to one of complete liberation from the demands of the law, won’t we be inviting licentiousness? Won’t we be tempted to abuse this freedom with self-indulgence? Isn’t such a grace a gross overstatement that removes our duties and promotes sinful behaviors? That is a genuine concern when such a radical gospel of free righteousness is preached. But note how the Apostle Paul responds to this logical concern:

Well then, should we keep on sinning so that God can show us more and more of his wonderful grace? Of course not! Since we have died to sin, how can we continue to live in it? (Romans 6:1-2 NLT)

He responds that *such a concern would be valid if a person was not regenerated*. But such a dangerous grace is *the truth of the gospel*, is *workable under regeneration*, and is a *necessary foundation* for a healthy faith. The gospel of grace asks us to move to the top of the continuum.

3.1.3 A Self-Love Continuum

A similar continuum may be constructed for our view of self. We may be tempted to move from *negative* self-loathing or self-ignorance to a *neutral* and impersonal self-evaluation and stewardship, but in light of Jesus’ command to love our neighbor as ourselves, and in light of the application of dangerous grace



Figure 3: A Self-Love Continuum

above, we must consider the parallel of moving to the top of the continuum (Figure 3). That is, to a *positive* self-love.

3.2 Biblical Foundationalism

A second model by which we may understand and implement healthy biblical self-love is a faith-development *foundationalism* model.

3.2.1 Grace Foundationalism

The gospel emphasis on *grace* may also be stated as a type of *faith-development foundationalism*. One of the central but hard-to-learn lessons of Christianity is that we must rest in and on the *foundation* of grace that God has given us, and not subtly shift to

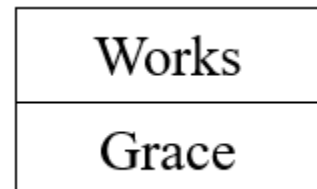


Figure 4: Grace as a foundation for good works

doing good works out of compulsion or works-based modes of salvation or sanctification.

The human tendency to abandon grace is a real and present danger, usually due to unredeemed human nature and worldly thinking. It is seen consistently in Church history, from the Galatian church to many succeeding Christian movements such as the Wesleyan holiness movements. A failure to rest on the foundation of grace is also well explored in the first few chapters of Hebrews, which concludes that “All who have entered that rest have ceased from their works” (Hebrews 4:10). Entirely ceased! As with the aforementioned preaching of grace in Romans, the good news of God’s grace seems entirely too kind, too free, and too vulnerable to human abuse! Yet it is foundational.

3.2.2 Self-love Foundationalism

This same alarmist argument may be made against healthy self-love – that it is too generous and vulnerable to human abuse. However, as claimed in §2.2 above, healthy self-love may be a prerequisite for a healthy love of others. In this same way as grace then, self-love, formed as we receive the love of God for our created self and agree with His assessments, may be viewed as a foundational principle, perhaps as dangerous as grace. I am proposing, then, a *dangerous self-love*, which functions similarly to grace in that it is foundational and necessary for spiritual health, and functions properly under the lordship of Christ and mediated and empowered by the Holy Spirit within the regenerated believer.

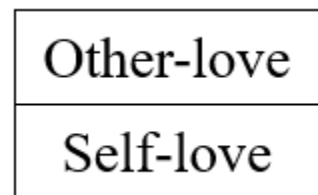


Figure 5: Self-love as a necessary foundation for other-love

3.3 Developmental Modeling

There are more complex models for human development, both secular and biblical. What is unique about the two models discussed below is the observation that healthy self-love, or self-concept, is necessary for continued maturity and successful love of others. This approach is

different from foundationalism in that the stage for developing self-love is not a first (foundational) one, yet it is still necessary on a linear path towards maturity and love for others.⁵

3.3.1 Erickson: *Self-concept precedes intimacy*

Erik Erickson's *Eight Stages of Psychosocial Development* (Figure 6) is a well-established and therapeutically implemented human development model (Erikson, 1993; Sokol, 2009). In the context of self-love, a healthy individual must complete stage five, *Identity v. Role Confusion* before they can successfully enter into and complete stage six, *Intimacy v. Isolation*. Failure in healthy identity formation (stage five) can lead to an inability to

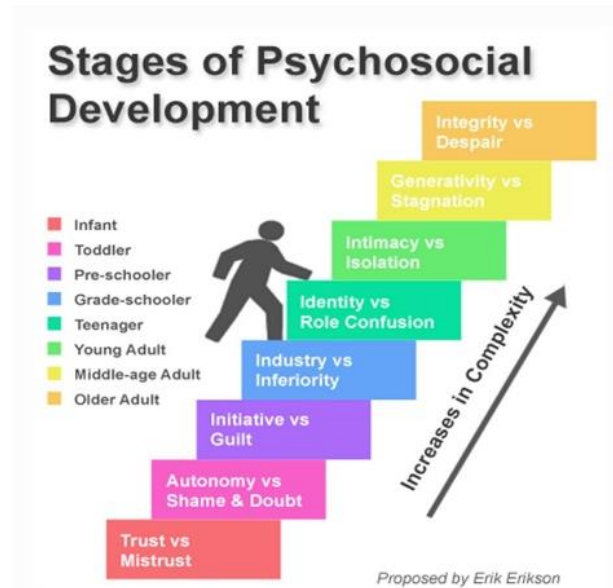


Figure 6: *Erickson's 8 Stages of Psychosocial Development*

be in relationship (stage six) because a lack of personal identity leads to either (a) having no self to share and enjoy with another (*identity diffusion*) or (b) *identity fusion*, where one's identity exists only as a part of the other person, which is commonly known as a type of co-dependency. According to Erickson, those who are successful in stage five develop the psychological virtue of *fidelity*, which allows them to relate to others and form genuine relationships (Arnold, 2017).

As an ethical system, it is no accident that Erickson identifies the successful completion of a developmental stage as an acquired *virtue*. The virtue gained from successful completion of

⁵ Linear development models are an oversimplification of a complex process, and many developmental theorists admit to a type of *spiral dynamic*, in which each new linear stage involves a revisit to previous stages, beefing them up in light of the current stage of development (Graves, 1981, 2004; Krumm & Parstorfer, 2018). Additionally, Fowler's *Stages of Faith* suggest a similar spiral overlay to his linear development model (Fowler, 1995, p. 275)

stage five *fidelity*, is the acquired integrity from having your self-concept defined and congruent with your created self rather than either undefined or mal-associated with someone other than yourself. This sets us up for successful development of the subsequent stage six virtue of *love*, the ability to love others from a defined self that is ready to give into relationship (love).

3.3.2 The Five Selves Model: Love of the Created Self

I have begun to elucidate a 5-selves spiritual development model from scripture (Figure 7), first introduced in October 2020 (Sinclair, 2020), inspired and informed by John Stott’s description of four selves (*created, fallen, redeemed, called*) in his classic *The Cross of Christ* (Stott, 1986, p. 283).⁶ In four of my five selves, there are gifts and talents to discover and embrace (all except for the *fallen* self). I have defined healthy self-love as an embrace of our first and foundational self, the *created* self.⁷

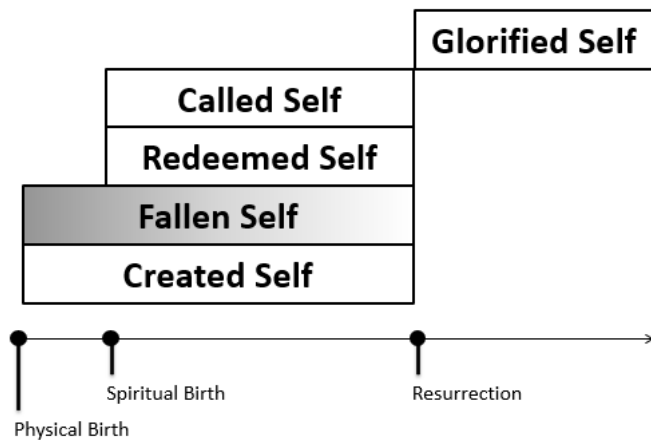


Figure 7: The 5-Selves Spiritual Development Model

The primary distinction to be made with this model concerning self-love is that we must embrace the redemption of the *created self* (“who we are in creation”) as a foundational and primary source of identity, not merely our *redeemed self* (“who we are in Christ”). The former

⁶ A similar schema appears in Helm’s *Human Nature from Calvin to Edwards*, in which he restates Augustine’s four states of man (Correction and Grace XXXIII): “It is possible to speak of a human nature which endures through all the four states of humankind: as originally *created*, as *fallen*, as *redeemed* in Christ, and as *consummated* in resurrection. . . . There is no treatment of human nature without it being a treatment of either *pristine* human nature, or as *fallen*, or as *regenerated and restored*, or as *glorified*” (Helm, 2018, p. xii, emphasis mine).

⁷ If the reader is partial to a unity and not separate selves, this model may be viewed as additional roles or states of being built upon a unitary, created self. That self is then restored and incorporated into the redeemed self, while the called and glorified self may be looked at merely as stages in the development of the original created self. However, some diversity must be assumed for a relational approach to self-love.

includes our haecceitic attributes given in creation, while the latter includes gifts and characteristics only available in our redeemed self in Christ (which also may be unique but are generally thought of as universal). Focusing on the redeemed self while ignoring the created self may appear pious, but is in fact building on an absent or unrestored foundation. As mentioned in Erickson's model, if we lack a sense of true identity based on our created selves, we may either end up having a *diffuse* identity (no identity to share in relationship), or we may enter into a codependent *identity fusion*, where "fusion with another becomes identity loss" (Erikson, 1994, p. 168). This loss of personal identity is seen in many Christians who identify with Christ, but have no sense of their own callings and gifts because such specificity seems like selfish boasting. They are spiritual but soulless, often tormented by depression that is rooted in unrevolved self-identity issues left unsolved by lack of a healthy self-love.

4 Objections

4.1 Whence self-denial?

Perhaps the first and most natural challenge to the idea of radical self-love is the question of self-denial, an undeniable element of Christian spirituality (Luke 9:23). Within the five selves model, I propose that self-denial means two things – a *complete and regular denial of the fallen self*, and an *occasional, if not habitual denial of our created self*, i.e. our own potential and natural God-given inclinations, motivated by love for others and devotion to the calling of God.

John Stott makes these same distinctions when discussing self-denial:

What we are (our self or personal identity) is partly the result of the creation (the image of God) and partly the result of the Fall (the image defaced). The self we are to deny, disown and crucify is our fallen self, everything within us that is incompatible with Jesus Christ (hence his commands 'let him deny himself' and then 'let him follow me'). The self we are to affirm and value is our created

self, everything within us that is compatible with Jesus Christ (hence his statement that if we lose ourselves by self-denial we will find ourselves). True self-denial (the denial of our false, fallen self) is not the road to self-destruction but the road to self-discovery....Sometimes, however, God calls us to deny to ourselves things which, though not wrong in themselves or attributable to the Fall, yet stand in the way of our doing his particular will for us. (Stott, 1986, pp. 282, 284)

4.2 How do we distinguish between healthy and unhealthy self-love?

Scripture warns that “in the last days, men will be lovers of self...rather than lovers of God” (2 Timothy 3:2-4). This passage is often read as a mutually exclusive dichotomy, where the love of self is always opposed to love for God. However, in light of both Jesus’ and Paul’s overtures to positive self-love, it makes more sense to view this as a clear definition of the unhealthy kind of self-love – one that justifies sinful attitudes and behaviors that are part of the fallen self, as opposed to one that embraces our created self. This passage lists the specific attitudes and practices that this unhealthy self-love traffics in; “lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure.”

4.3 How can we recognize and honor the created self if it is corrupted?

The difficulty of being individuals in the middle of the sanctification process makes discernment of our created selves and living from our redeemed self a battle (cf. Paul’s wrestling in Romans 7). In addition to the three guides we have through God’s word and regeneration described in §2.1 above (*the bible, the new self, the communication and love of the Spirit*), we can look to natural law and our own experience to determine what is true about ourselves. The

primary measure of virtues and activities that identify our created purposes is a teliological argument – that divine purposes are attended by joy, happiness, and peace that indicate our created purposes. This measure is commonly asked as a question – “What activities can you get lost in? Where you lose track of time, feel joy and fulfillment, and have a sense of divine confirmation?”

Additionally, as a general rule, activities that lead to health and wellness may be congruent with our created selves, whereas those that lead to morbidity and mortality may be viewed with nearly as much doubt as those forbidden by scripture.

4.4 Can we get self-esteem merely from God’s love?

Can we rely solely on God’s revelation of truth and His love for us to restore our self-esteem, and avoid the risks associated with self-love? Certainly, the ultimate arbiter of value and giver of love is God Himself. But the love of God for us, as transformative and foundational as it is, is limited in its effectiveness if we fail to *agree* with God that we are loved and lovable, beautiful and made in the image of God, and worthy of knowledge, embrace, and investment. A failure to agree with and actively participate in this and any truth stunts our growth. Additionally, from a VE position, our failure to embody love in our innermost being is an ethical failure. We are not only to let God love us, but teach us TO love, and enter into that process.

4.5 Didn’t Paul merely take a neutral, not radically positive view in Romans 12?

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 faith God has distributed to each of you. (Romans 12:3)

This passage asks us to not think too highly of ourselves but lacks a statement against thinking too lowly of ourselves. It can be argued that on a continuum like that proposed in §3.1.3 above, Paul is at best arguing for a *neutral* position. However, in affirming that they ought to

“think...in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each,” he is at least asking us to acknowledge the good things we have received in our *redeemed* self, which may be halfway towards a positive affirmation and embrace of our *created* self.

It is admitted that healthy self-love in scripture is more assumed than explicitly taught, though seen more than obliquely in Jesus’ command to love neighbor as self and in Paul’s admonition that husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies, since “no one ever hated their bodies” (Ephesians 5:29) (I suppose Paul never met a modern bulimic!). This absence of explicit radical self-love in scripture, if not in this specific passage, does not invalidate such self-love, but may merely reflect a focus on God as source and savior. This is a decent objection, but within the larger biblical, rational, and experiential frameworks presented here, radical, healthy self-love is still congruent with this passage and the rest of scripture.

4.6 Aren’t personality tests just an exercise in self-absorption?

The popularity of personality tests in Evangelicalism, even those with possible pagan religious roots such as the enneagram⁸, can be viewed in one of two ways. Negatively, this trend can be viewed as a continued slide into *moralistic therapeutic deism* (Smith, 2009), selfishness, and secular or new-age deceptions. However, I argue that the lack of healthy self-love in our doctrine and resulting Christian culture and the valid need for healthy self-knowledge and self-love is often filled by primarily unbiblical sources. Not all self-knowledge tools are illegitimate

⁸ The origin of the enneagram is debated, some claiming that its 9 archetypes trace back to the 4th century Christian ascetic Evagrius Ponticus (Wiltse, 2011), while others also trace its recent incarnations to new age Armenian mystic George Ivanovich Gurdjieffian (Maitri, 2001). Major Christian publishers such as Nelson, InterVarsity Press, Crossroad, and Zondervan all have extensive enneagram offerings (Cron & Stabile, 2016; Heuertz & Rohr, 2017; McCord & Hinton, 2019; Rohr & Ebert, 2001), but many Christians are now testifying to the occult and anti-biblical thought involved in enneagram mania (Doreen Virtue, 2020)

or incongruent with biblical faith, and some can meet our need to know ourselves, love ourselves, and give our healthy selves in service to God.⁹

5 Conclusion

A biblical definition of and implementation of healthy self-love is a necessary part of Christian spirituality. Jesus' recapitulation of the two great commandments assumes such healthy self-love and provides principles for its implementation within a framework of love for God and others. The alarming risks of preaching a radical, foundational grace are also aroused by the preaching of radical self-love, but can be ameliorated by the same safeguards of God's word and regeneration. Additionally, as grace is a foundation for properly motivated works, self-love is a foundation for properly motivated love of others. The absence of such teachings and practices in the Church has perpetuated emotional ill health and has stunted the ability to love well. Fears of selfishness and idolization of one's own potential are real, but should not be cause for abandoning healthy self-love. Rather, such grace should be encouraged within the framework of God's word, regeneration, and service to others.

6 References

Arnold, M. E. (2017). Supporting Adolescent Exploration and Commitment: Identity Formation, Thriving, and Positive Youth Development. *Journal of Youth Development*, 12(4), 1–15.
<https://doi.org/10.5195/jyd.2017.522>

⁹ Traditionally, an evangelical approach to self-knowledge consists merely of a "spiritual gifts inventory" (Arthur et al., 2010; Stanley, 2010; Wagner, 2017) which is too narrowly biblical and not comprehensive in assessing one's created gifts – in fact, spiritual gifts are more a part of the redeemed self, and this is another incomplete approach in the individual's desire to know themselves. However, attempts to merge spiritual gifts inventories with the popular DISC and Myers-Briggs profiles have been created (Carbonell, 2006; Johnson, 2014), and Nelson Bolles perennial favorite *What Color is Your Parachute* has some very helpful self-knowledge tools, as well as a Christian subtext that is explicit in the How to Find Your Mission in Life appendix (Bolles, 2005, 2005).

- Bradshaw, J. (1990). *Homecoming: Reclaiming and championing your inner child*. Bantam Books.
- Cashdan, S. (1988). *Object Relations Therapy: Using the Relationship*. W. W. Norton & Company.
- Cron, I. M., & Stabile, S. (2016). *The Road Back to You: An Enneagram Journey to Self-Discovery*. IVP Books.
- Eckhart, M. translated by R. B. B. (1941). *Meister Eckhart: The Celebrated 14th. Century Mystic and Scholastic Meister Eckhart. A Central Source and Inspiration of Dominant Currents in Philosophy and Theology Since Aquinas with the Text of His Historic Defense Against Heresy*. Harper Torchbooks.
- Erikson, E. H. (1993). *Childhood and Society* (2nd ed. edition). W. W. Norton & Company.
- Erikson, E. H. (1994). *Identity: Youth and Crisis*. W. W. Norton & Company.
- Fowler, J. W. (1995). *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*. HarperCollins.
- Frame, J. M. (2017). *Theology in Three Dimensions: A Guide to Triperspectivalism and Its Significance*. P & R Publishing.
- Fromm, E., Ashen, R. N., & Anshen, R. N. (1989). *The Art of Loving* (Highlighting edition). Perennial.
- Graves, C. W. (1981, May). *Summary Statement: The emergent, cyclical, double-helix model of the adult human biopsychosocial systems*.
http://clarewgraves.com/articles_content/1981_handout/1981_summary.pdf
- Graves, C. W. (2004). *Levels of Human Existence*.
- Heuertz, C. L., & Rohr, R. (2017). *The Sacred Enneagram: Finding Your Unique Path to Spiritual Growth*. Zondervan.

- Krumm, R., & Parstorfer, B. (2018). *Clare W. Graves: His Life and His Work*. iUniverse.
- Maitri, S. (2001). *The Spiritual Dimension of the Enneagram: Nine Faces of the Soul* (Reprint edition). TarcherPerigee.
- McCord, B., & Hinton, K. (2019). *The Enneagram Type 1: The Moral Perfectionist*. Thomas Nelson.
- Palmer, P. J. (1999). *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*. Jossey-Bass.
- Sinclair, D. (2020, October). Recognizing our Five Selves. *Whole Reason*.
<https://www.wholereason.com/2020/10/recognizing-our-five-selves.html>
- Smith, C. (2009). *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Reprint edition). Oxford University Press.
- Sokol, J. T. (2009). Identity Development Throughout the Lifetime: An Examination of Eriksonian Theory. *Graduate Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 1(2), 12.
- Stott, J. R. W. (1986). *The Cross of Christ*.
- Travis, J. W., & Ryan, R. S. (2004). *The Wellness Workbook, 3rd ed: How to Achieve Enduring Health and Vitality* (3rd ed. edition). Celestial Arts.
- Wiltse, V. (2011). HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT: OBSERVATIONS ON THE ORIGINS OF THE ENNEAGRAM. *The Enneagram Journal*, 4–40.