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Self-Image, Self-Love, and Salvation

James E. Faulconer

Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves.

--Philippians 2:3

This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come. For men shall be lovers of their own selves. . . .

--Timothy 3:1-2

As a missionary I had two companions whom we thought quite successful. (We were never sure just how to decide who was successful as a missionary and who wasn't--and we probably shouldn't have cared--and we probably shouldn't have cared--but we thought we knew success when we saw it.) The first companion had been a ranch hand and had saved money for his mission by breaking horses and punching cattle. He was unselfconscious about doing missionary work, always thinking about what needed to be done to teach our "investigators" and about how we could make more contacts and get more appointments. Though he had no previous foreign language training, his Korean was good. But when anyone complimented him--about his language, his teaching, or even his appearance--he was genuinely surprised. He obviously had not thought about himself that way. The members of the branch where we worked had a great deal of respect for him, and other missionaries naturally looked to him for leadership. Many of the people he taught were baptized (I say *he* because I had too little experience at the time to do more than follow along), and many of the people he baptized are still stalwart members of the Church.

The other companion also worked hard and spoke the language well. He, too, baptized a lot and had the respect of members and missionaries. But there was a difference in the respect. We thought we should respect this elder. After all, compared to the rest of us, he baptized a great deal and he worked very hard. But we were always uncomfortable around him, and our discomfort tinged our respect. Whereas the respect we felt for the first of these two missionaries was a form of love, the respect we felt for this one was a form of uncomfortable awe. Because the mission rules said we were to be up by 5:30 each morning, he was always up by 5:00. Though we were to be home by 10:00 at night, we always tracted "just one more house" until that time or later. Only then would we catch a bus to return to our house. Everything he did was done with an odd intensity. He was not unselfconscious about his service. On the contrary he was very much aware of what he was doing, of his goals, of his mental attitude and self-image, of

making sure he made contact with and baptized just the right kind of people. But, unlike the converts made by the first elder, few of the people he baptized are still in the Church.

What was the difference between these two elders? I think it would be accurate to say, now that I can look back from more than twenty years, that the first was a much better missionary than the second--he was a better person and, therefore, better at teaching the gospel--even though during the time the three of us served our missions it was not so easy to see that was the case, and even though I'm still not sure just how to measure who is successful and who is not. There is, of course, a good deal more to whether baptized members faithfully remain in the Church than simply what the missionary who found and taught them was like. Nonetheless, there was a difference which I am persuaded accounts for some of the difference in the results of their missions.

In today's parlance, we could speak of the good self-images both of these missionaries had. We noticed then that both were organized and set good goals, and both kept the mission rules. Both had positive mental attitudes as well. Both seemed to have all the things we had been told were important, the things that today are thought to be part of a good self-image. But there was that difference, a difference we could see, though we attributed it merely to our liking one better than the other. We could not really explain or name the difference we felt between the two. In fact, the only difference we could name was one that confused us: the second missionary fit what we had been taught were "the formulas for success" more clearly than did the first. He more obviously had a good self-image, a positive mental attitude, and clear, realistic goals. He worked harder than the first--at least from our perspective--and he was a better model of what the world, in our classes and magazines and books, tells us a successful person is.

At odd moments since returning from my mission, I have puzzled over these two missionaries. How is it that the more successful, more loved, more loving of these two wasn't what we are often told he needed to be--at least not as clearly as was the less successful one? Why is it that the one who looked, from the world's point of view, like he would be more successful now looks to have been less successful?

I cannot help but think that a large part of the difference between these two missionaries was in their devotion. Looking back, I can see that the first loved the Lord and the work, but he had no particular thought for himself. The second, on the other hand, seems to me to have been filled with self-love and self-regard and, therefore, never really did serve the Lord and the Church. Unfortunately, even his missionary service was a way of doing something for himself. I would even go so far as to say that the second missionary was not as good as the first *because* he fit the criteria that the world tells us are necessary for success, or perhaps I should say because he fit himself to those criteria.

Today I hear a great deal about self-image, self-love, self-esteem, and positive mental attitude--all variations on a theme and all topics rarely mentioned fifty years ago and virtually never discussed one hundred years ago. Educators seem especially fond of this kind of talk--being an educator I hear it frequently--and sometimes they think and talk and act as if these concepts and what goes with them are part of the gospel. But it isn't only educators who have come to talk

this way. In fact nowadays it is uncommon to sit through a sacrament meeting, or a stake training or leadership meeting, without hearing someone talk about the need for a good self-image or self-esteem or some related psychological concept.

Why is this talk about self-image and self-esteem so common? Partly, I think, because it is commonly believed in the world. We often pick up from the world things that we then begin to think about in the context of the gospel. But that isn't the only reason it is so common. It is common because it seems to make a lot of sense.

Many people believe that in order to think about something, to be able to identify it or know it or answer questions about it, we have to have an "image" of that thing, some sort of picture of it in our heads. If we accept that assumption and apply it to ourselves, it seems obvious that in order to know who we are and to know what we can or should do, we must have an image of ourselves. It is this commonly held assumption that accounts for the frequency with which we hear and talk about self-image. From the point of view created once we make this assumption, we all have an image of ourselves and that image is an important, even a necessary part of our lives, for good or bad. Thus, once we have accepted this assumption, often the question we are concerned with is, what kind of regard or image do I have for myself? Negative or positive? We seldom question the ideas that give rise to these questions, especially the description of thought they presume.

These ideas are so widely accepted that we think them facts rather than assumptions and ideas, but they are based on a description of the self and thought and the relation of thought to our actions that few of those in philosophy and psychology who deal with questions like these would think adequate. It is a description with its origins in European philosophy, a description that has its beginning in about 1650, a description against which strong arguments were advanced fifty years ago or more and which seems not to work even though it has, at first glance, common-sense appeal. (It is also a description of thinking that some have persuasively argued is based on belief in the apostate "god.") In spite of its current popularity, from a philosophical psychological point of view, the discussion of self-image has a rather recent and a very weak theoretical foundation. In addition, from an empirical point of view, relatively little research evidence supports our belief in the importance of self-image and some even indicates it may be a negative factor. As Gary Trudeau, the artist who writes "Doonesbury," pointed out in a satire of the California self-esteem study several years ago, it seems likely that self-esteem is, at best, not something that causes anything at all, "but simply the happy side effect of a sturdy character, itself the product of unambiguous moral education."

Of course, that philosophers and theoretical psychologists--or cartoonists--think that the theoretical and empirical foundations for a belief in self-image are weak isn't sufficient reason to reject it. No one considered an expert in theology accepts the Latter-day Saint point of view, and that doesn't make us wrong or our beliefs dubious, except perhaps to them. The truth of beliefs isn't a matter of simple consensus, a tabulation of those who believe in self-image and those who don't.

From the gospel point of view, we must ask a completely different question: Is the universality of self-regard and the necessity of a good self-image a fact? Is this way of seeing the world true?

Put another way, is it compatible with the gospel of Jesus Christ? That is the question I would like to pursue. If we are wrong about the necessity of a good self-image, we may be in real danger; for these assumptions and those that go with them about self-love, winning attitudes, and so on may be merely the teachings of men rather than the doctrine of God (and they are not particularly good by the standards of the philosophies of men). I suspect they are bad doctrine as well as bad philosophy.

The Lord has more than once warned us of merely worldly “philosophies.” In Joseph Smith--History 1:19 he condemns the churches of the nineteenth century for teaching for doctrines the commandments of men. Doing so, he said, is to draw near to him with our lips but to have our hearts far from him. That is a severe condemnation. It is the charge of blasphemy, of taking the Lord’s name on ourselves in vain. But it is also a condemnation that members of the Church risk if we too are guilty of such false teaching. Our doctrine is to be the doctrine of Christ rather than of men. But, if it turns out--as I think it does--that the teachings about self-image and so on are more the teachings of men than of Christ, we should not be particularly surprised that we have been seduced. We are, after all, those for whom these so-called philosophies have been specifically designed. If we have been seduced, we have no need of breast-beating; we need only to change--to repent.

For me the first sign that there is something suspect about the notions I have mentioned is that they are taught and honored by so many in the world and that the notions like “low self-esteem” are often used to explain and, thereby, implicitly to excuse, what would otherwise be counted as sin. If the world so openly and fervently espouses a doctrine, I think we should be cautious of it.

The second sign, however, is more incriminating: the concept of self-image is a doctrine taught by Korihor, the anti-Christ. Korihor taught that

every man fared in this life according to the management of the creature; therefore every man prospered according to his genius, and . . . every man conquered according to his strength. . . . (Alma 30:17)

That seems to me to be a reasonable synopsis of much of the material I see: we can do anything we set our minds to--we prosper according to our genius; we conquer the obstacles in our lives according to our strength.

The scriptures say the opposite. In Matthew 6:27, for example, Christ tells us we cannot, by taking thought, add one cubit to our stature. At first glance this seems only to mean that we cannot make ourselves taller. But that is a very odd interpretation. Why would the Savior go out of his way to say something so obvious? Doesn’t it mean instead that we owe what we are to God, that we cannot make ourselves anything better, that the exercise of will is not something that can save or exalt us--or even make us taller? In short, thinking something to be so doesn’t make it so. But to deny that is to deny a great deal of what currently passes for truth and wisdom. How often do we see office signs or posters that say, in effect, whatever you really believe will come to pass must come to pass--our version of Korihor’s doctrine, a doctrine that makes us rather than our Father in Heaven the masters of our fate? How often do we assent to such signs,

even if only implicitly, because we are so used to seeing them, because it is something we have heard over and over again?

Sometimes we say we cannot love others unless we love ourselves first. Given the teachings of the world, that claim has become so seemingly obvious that we don't question it. But is it true? I see no reason to believe it is. For one thing, to me, the most obvious problem is that love seems necessarily to be love for something that is other than oneself. Love of self is a strange thing. Love seems to be a desire for something (though not always a need of it). But I can only desire what is other than myself, never myself. If that is true, then self-love is a contradiction. In the second place, when the scriptures speak of God's love, it is always his love of something other than himself--of his children (Galatians 2:20, 1 John 4:11, and Moses 1:39), of the world (John 3:16 and D&C 34:3). There are no scriptural references to Divine self-love.

Some defend the claim that self-love is necessary if we are to love others by referring to part of Leviticus 19:18: "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself." After all, this scripture has been repeated by Christ several times, and it seems to refer to the necessity of self-love. But it is not clear that it does. In the first place. The scripture assumes that those to whom it is addressed love themselves, but it doesn't command them to do so.

The logic of the language in this verse looks like this: If a person says, "Do this as John does," that person has implied that John does whatever it is that is under discussion, and he or she has commanded you to do it, but the person has not commanded John to do it or even approved of John doing it.

Given that the person has asked us to do it, perhaps we infer that it is all right for John to do it, but that inference isn't a logical inference. It isn't implied by what the person said. In other words, it doesn't follow logically from what the person said. He or she could deny that John should do it without contradicting the admonition that we should do it. We can easily conceive of circumstances where we should do something as John does it, but John should not. For example, we can imagine that I am an ambulance driver on an emergency run and someone says, "Drive as your teenage son does." Clearly the person wants me to drive as he supposes my son does--speeding--but it is unlikely that he is also saying my son should drive that way. He has given me something to compare my driving to without approving--or disapproving--of the standard of comparison.

By the same reasoning, the command to love another as myself is not a command to love myself. It assumes I do, and it tells me to use that as a standards for loving others. Without adding something to it that isn't there, it says no more than that.

Also consider the passage in its original context: "Thou shalt not avenge, nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people, but thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself: I am the Lord." The quotation from Leviticus does not advise us to love ourselves, but reminds us that we have no right to judge our neighbors--only the Lord does--so we must love them. This is another version of the "Golden Rule" in Matthew 7:12. As such, it sets a minimum standards for conduct; it doesn't tell us that we ought to think of ourselves, either first or at all.

To see this better, look at the context in which Jesus quotes from Leviticus in the New Testament. Each time, he is speaking to a group of Pharisees and others who have a particular problem with both self-love and judging others. As much as anything else, it seems their desire for themselves and for their positions and their pseudo-authority--and the judgment of others implicit in that self-desire, position, and authority--prevents the Pharisees he is speaking to from seeing the Jesus is the Savior. I do not think he gave the commandment from Leviticus to them as an approval of self-love. He gave it as a condemnation of them. To them he repeats the law of Moses; self-love is part of that law, not because it is good, but because it at least provides a standard that sinful people can understand. (And, of course, it is part of the law of Moses only if we don't see that law in its depth, if we don't see it as a precursor and guide to Christ.) It is as if the verse in Matthew uses Leviticus to say: You have no problem loving yourselves; love others at least that much instead of judging them. It is more than appropriate that Christ quotes this scripture to those scribes, Pharisees, and others who oppose him, and even to us today--to anyone who already loves himself or herself.

But contrast Leviticus 19:18 with what Christ says to his disciples in John 13:34, in his last instructions to the first Twelve: "A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another." As John later points out, this "new" commandment has been a commandment from the beginning (1 John 2:7, 8). The law of Christ fulfills the law of Moses by showing us what the law of Moses meant, so in giving a new commandment, the Savior was revealing what stood behind the old one. As I read these verses, just before his sacrifice Christ gave this new, fulfilling, and basic commandment about love, a commandment in which we are told, first, only to love one another. No qualifiers for that love are given. Then, so there can be no mistaking this new commandment for the old one--so we can really understand what kind of love the love of our neighbor should be--we are given a new standard for that love: we are told to love one another as Christ loves us, not as we love ourselves. Later that night, in the Garden of Gethsemane, and the next day, on the cross, Christ's suffering for us gives profound punctuation to the new commandment and the love of which it speaks. Christ commands a love that empties itself (to use the language of Philippians 2:7--"made himself of no reputation" in the King James translation), a love that seeks not its own glory, but the glory of another (John 8:50).

There is nothing in this new commandment about having self-esteem. Neither is there anything about self-love or positive mental attitude. Why? I think it is because--as we are told in the same place in which we are told we cannot make ourselves taller by taking thought--we cannot serve two masters, for we cannot love them both (Matthew 6:24). We cannot serve both God and the world. But since the world demands that we serve ourselves, we also cannot serve both him and ourselves.

There is a companion doctrine: Mark 8:35 teaches that those who would save their lives will lose them and those who lose their lives for Christ's sake and the gospel's sake will save them. The Greek word translated "life" could just as well have been translated "soul," or even "self": those who would save their selves will lose their selves--their souls--but those who lose themselves for Christ's sake and the gospel's will save themselves.

These sayings can seem hard to us, but we must be careful that we do not become like the ruler who went away sorrowing because he would not understand the teachings of the Savior and obey them, who went away because the doctrine seemed hard to him (Mark 10:17-22). We must understand the doctrine of Christ so we can obey it, and we must remember that his doctrine is often quite incompatible with that of men.

His doctrine is taught in many places in the scriptures. A beautiful synopsis of it is given in Micah 6:8: "He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?" In few places, however, is it as detailed as in King Benjamin's sermon, particularly Mosiah 4:6-11:

I say unto you, if ye have come to a knowledge of the goodness of God, and his matchless power, and his wisdom, and his patience, and his long-suffering towards the children of men; and also, the atonement which has been prepared from the foundation of the world, that thereby salvation might come to him that should put his trust in the Lord, and should be diligent in keeping his commandments, and continue in the faith even unto the end of this life, I mean the life of the mortal body--

I say, that this is the man who receiveth salvation, through the atonement which was prepared from the foundation of the world for all mankind, which ever were since the fall of Adam, or who are, or who ever shall be, even unto the end of the world.

And this is the means whereby salvation cometh. And there is none other salvation save this which hath been spoken of; neither are there any conditions whereby man can be saved except the conditions which I have told you.

Believe in God; believe that he is, and that he created all things, both in heaven and in earth; believe that he has all wisdom, and all power, both in heaven and in earth; believe that man doth not comprehend all the things which the Lord can comprehend.

And again, believe that ye must repent of your sins and forsake them, and humble yourselves before God; and ask in sincerity of heart that he would forgive you; and now, if you believe all these things see that ye do them.

And again I say unto you as I have said before, that as ye have come to the knowledge of the glory of God, or if ye have known of his goodness and have tasted of his love, and have received a remission of your sins, which causeth such exceeding great joy in your souls, even so I would that ye should remember, and always retain in remembrance, the greatness of God, and your own nothingness, and his goodness and long-suffering towards you, unworthy creatures, and humble yourselves even in the depths of humility, calling on the name of the Lord daily, and standing steadfastly in the faith of that which is to come, which was spoken of by the mouth of the angel.

Hearing this sermon wrought such a mighty change in the hearts of the large congregation that they ceased even to desire to do evil (Mosiah 5:1-5). We ought to expect that such a mighty

change can be wrought in our hearts through reading King Benjamin's sermon and understanding it through the administration of the Holy Ghost. (There are sufficient references to this sermon in the rest of the Book of Mormon to make me think it is one of the most important sermons in the book.) In the gospel we should find the alternative to the often espoused teachings of men, and King Benjamin says we have the essence of the gospel in this passage, which gives us the conditions of salvation: we must know the goodness of God--his matchless power, his wisdom, patience and long-suffering-- and we must know of the Atonement, prepared so those who trust the Lord and obey his commandments and continue in faith can be saved.

Lest we misunderstand these conditions, King Benjamin repeats them in a different way: we must believe that God exists and that he created all things; we must believe that we do not understand what he does; we must believe in the necessity of repentance; and we must act on these beliefs. Then, still differently, he repeats them again: if we receive a remission of our sins, we will remember the greatness of God and our won nothingness (which is one thin, not two), and remembering his love and kindness and patience toward us, we will humble ourselves, pray, and remain faithful.

If we do these things--if we receive a remission of our sins--we will receive the blessings enumerated in verses 12 through 16: we will rejoice and be filled with love. We will retain the remission of our sins. We will grow in the knowledge of God, justice, and truth. We will not have a mind to injure one another, but to live peaceably. We will not allow our children to suffer or quarrel or break the commandments. Instead we will teach them to live righteously. And we will give comfort, love, and assistance to all those who stand in need of it without begrudging them those gifts.

Most often we think of what is said in verses 12 through 16 as commandments, but attention to the beginning of verse 12 shows they are not. They are the blessings that accompany our repentance and acceptance of the Atonement. On the other hand, in a very real sense all commandments are blessings; there is no essential distinction between the two (see D&C 59:3-4).

Nowhere in King Benjamin's sermon do I find that self-love or a good self-image or a positive mental attitude or any of the rest of contemporary pop psychology are necessary. In fact, I see exactly the opposite. Notice the parallels: we must know of the Atonement; we must believe in the necessity of repentance; we must remember our own nothingness. To me this says that to know of the Atonement is to know that we cannot save ourselves, which is to know that we must repent, which is to know that we are, of ourselves, nothing. If we do not remember the creator's greatness and our won nothingness, we have not met the criteria for salvation--self-love and salvation are mutually exclusive.

Notice, of course, that this scripture does not advocate being thoughtless or having a poor self-image, nor does it advocate lack of preparation and planning. Those who are thoughtless or do not prepare properly are selfish, for they are not concerned with getting the Lord's work done in the best way they can. They are too concerned with their own projects and purposes. They do not take account of what must be taken account of if we are to live in the world as we should.

Like those with a good self-image, those who do not prepare are concerned about themselves, not the work.

A poor self-image--like every self-image including a good one--is selfish. To be selfish is, by definition, to be self-centered, to place oneself at the center of things. But to be concerned about a self-image--good or bad--is also to place oneself at the center; it is to act contrary to the admonition given in Doctrine and Covenants 4:1,2 and 5:

Now behold, a marvelous work is about to come forth among the children of men. Therefore, O ye that embark in the service of God, see that ye serve him with all your heart, might, mind and strength, that ye may stand blameless before God at the last day. . . . And faith, hope charity and love, *with an eye single to the glory of God*, qualify him for the work. (*emphasis added*)

To be concerned about a self-image is to have an eye on something other than the glory of god, which is his work (Moses 1:39). It is to have our eye on our won glory. It is to ignore Solomon's warning: "He that trusteth in his own heart is a fool" (Proverbs 28:25). Even more seriously, it is to ignore the Savior's warning mentioned earlier: "For whosoever will save his life shall lose it; but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel's, the same shall save it" (Mark 8:35).

There is an analogy in music performance, athletics, writing, and most other endeavors: at some point one must lose consciousness of oneself in order to do the job well, one must become wrapped up in the job to be done--the piece to be played, the race to be run, the poem to be written. Having an eye on oneself, thinking about how one is playing or running or writing, only gets in the way of doing what needs to be done. But there are difference between writing, playing music, and playing sports, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, living these scriptural teachings. The discourses of athletics and business are insufficient languages for talking about religious experience, and it may say something about the impoverishment of our spiritual language that we find it difficult to speak of our religious experiences without recourse to the discourses of athletics and business. We seem to lack a genuinely religious language. The analogy breaks down.

In athletics, for example, it seems helpful to visualize my athletic performance, especially in the early stages, when I'm still learning how to perform, or as a kind of "warm up" before a particularly difficult feat. And in music and athletics *perhaps* I need to believe I am capable of doing the job before I can actually do it. (Perhaps getting such confidence sometimes requires visualization.) In the gospel, however, no such visualization or *self*-confidence is needed. In fact, the scriptures say I must know that, of myself, I *cannot* do what needs to be done. I must know my weaknesses and become humble. Then, once I am humbled by my weaknesses, remembering his goodness and mercy, I must go to the Lord in faith, trusting him to do what I have discovered I cannot do (Ether 12:27).

Those who do not discover that, ultimately, they cannot do what needs to be done have a pride which prevents them from receiving the greatest blessings and which may open them to being led

away by someone like Korihor. On the other hand, those who only discover their ultimate weakness despair. I suspect they suffer what Paul described as “the sorrow of the world” (2 Corinthians 7:9-10), what Mormon called “the sorrowing of the damned” (Mormon 2:13). In contrast, those who recognize their weaknesses and are humbled by them--those, in the words of King Benjamin and Moses, who understand their nothingness and who, in addition, turn to the Lord, recognizing the great blessings he has already given his children and trusting him to do the work that needs to be done with them as an instrument--have godly sorrow, sorrow to repentance and salvation.

These last two categories, those who recognize their ultimate weakness and, thus, despair, versus those who recognize their weakness and respond in faith, are the ones the scriptures focus on. The scriptures seem to assume that at some point everyone will discover that he or she is inadequate. I think they tell us that at some point everyone will lose confidence. At that point, the choices are despair and faith. Being reduced to despair may be exactly what we need in order to see that choice. As a result, though it may give us the appearance of mental and spiritual health, by postponing the choice between despair and faith, self-confidence built on an image of oneself probably will harm us, leading us to believe there is an alternative to trusting in God, namely trusting in ourselves. Such self-confidence may well hurt us spiritually by allowing us to continue to trust in the arm of flesh.

Ironically, since by definition an image is not the real thing, the self placed at the center when one is concerned about self-image isn't even a real self. (This is a corollary of the fact that love is necessarily of something other than ourselves: love of self is love of something that is not really our self.) Those in the world who advocate self-image ask us to leave reality in order to concentrate on a fantasy, a positive fantasy to be sure, but a fantasy nonetheless. The self we love in any form of selfishness is an imaginary, not a real self--even if that selfishness, like self-image and Positive Mental Attitude “psychology,” is one our culture and its leaders and teachers approve of.

Advocates of self-esteem will say that such an image is, perhaps, a fantasy, but it is also a goal, something the person can look to which will determine what he will be and how he will perform. But the scriptures seem to me to say that what determines what a person will be, with the Lord's help, and how she will perform is how much a person ceases to think about herself, how lost she becomes in the work, how much she becomes like a little child, unconcerned about herself as she goes about her Father's business, not how much she has paid attention to herself, as a goal or otherwise. As a friend of mine said, “It is dangerous to think too much about ourselves. Of all subjects, that's the one we are the most liable to be biased about.” What the scriptures demand is humility, not self-esteem.

Because it asks us to replace ourselves with a fantasy, with something unreal, self-love is the making of a lie. (Doctrine and Covenants 76:103 may be relevant here.) But it is important to reiterate that it is not only worrying about good self-image that is a problem. Having a bad self-image, being incapacitated by depression about one's lack of ability, looks, relations with others, or anything else is despair, and despair denies God. Those doing these things recognize their weaknesses, but they do not add to that a remembrance of the goodness and long-suffering and

mercy of the Lord. Bad self-image, depression about one's lack of ability, looks, or relations with others are at best ways of merely feigning our nothingness before God. On the other hand, a good self-image, self confidence, etc., are ways of feigning our confidence before him. But neither of these is at all like the real feelings of both nothingness and confidence before him. Having a good self-image and having a bad one are mutually exclusive, but being aware of one's nothingness and being confident before God are not only not mutually exclusive, they are also the same thing. For once I am aware of my nothingness I can begin to trust the Lord as I really ought., whole-heartedly and without reservation, and when I do that he gives me the confidence I need, confidence in him.

It strikes me that there is an irony concealed in the mutual incompatibility of good and bad self-images. Seeing them as incompatible is itself a way of hiding from God. For by making them mutually exclusive, we are able to think we can or must choose between them, that there are no other choices. Thinking that way, we are able to think we are doing something grand when we get over having a bad self-image by replacing it with a good one; we are able to persuade ourselves that we have genuinely changed and, thus, to make ourselves feel good without ever having given up the self-centeredness that was the problem in the first place. But change without repentance isn't real. It's just more of the same old thing, but covered in a more socially acceptable garb. Thus, working at changing our bad self-image instead of learning to trust the Lord is little more than a way of filling ourselves with activities and thought that allow us to avoid repentance. In its masquerade as confidence, self-esteem resulting from a good self-image may well be the thing that prevents us from seeing our won dependence upon God and the necessity of the Atonement.

I think that is why the scriptures don't speak of self-image, though they do speak of confidence. Perhaps part of the reason we are sometimes too quick to transport the "philosophies" of men into the gospel is that we are too quick to translate the terms of the gospel into terms that have their origin in the thought of the world. If we were to be more cautious about how we speak and how we teach, using the scriptures and scriptural terminology as our standard, would we talk about behavioral objectives, self-esteem seeking to excel? Or would such terms make us nervous? (W. W. Phelps, after all, was condemned by the Lord for the last of these--Doctrine and Covenants 58:41--yet we often recommend it to people without a second thought.) What would our lessons be like if when we talked about esteem we talked about it in the scriptural sense, and when we talked about confidence or love we used the scriptures as our guide? Would anything be lost? Wouldn't a great deal be gained by developing a religious language to talk about our religious experiences rather than borrowing from the discourses of our secular pursuits? In fact, might we not find that our religious experiences are deepened when we have a language in which we can talk about them appropriately? Armed with an unborrowed language for talking about our spiritual experience, might we not find that deepened religious experience in turn deepens our otherwise secular pursuits? Aren't the scriptures and the teaching of the prophets the place to go when looking for such language?

If we talk about my two companions in scriptural terms, what can we say about the first one that will distinguish him from the second? He did have confidence. We all noticed it. But we thought the second did too. The first was able to do a great deal. But we thought the second did

even more. Though he seemed never to have spent time thinking about it, the first of these two missionaries knew he spoke Korean better than most of us. We could tell because he went out of his way to help us learn what he knew. But the second one spoke good Korean, too. The first companion was an excellent example of one who knew what to do and had the confidence to do it. Yet his knowledge of himself wasn't a reflective knowledge located in an image of himself. It was a knowledge found in the work, in what he did for and with others, not in what he said or thought about himself.

Unlike the second missionary, my first companion seemed to have, as is required, his eye single to the glory of God. That seems to be the difference. And that difference made it possible for him to be humble and confident at the same time, for he was not self-confident, though we may have judged him to be. He was confident in the Lord.

But, if what King Benjamin says is correct, that he had to know of his own nothingness, how could he have confidence and, at the same time, need no image of himself because he had his eye single to the glory of God? Doctrine and Covenants 121:45-46 is instructive:

Let thy bowels also be full of charity towards all men, and to the household of faith, and let virtue garnish [to clothe, to supply a means of defense for] thy thoughts unceasingly; then shall thy confidence wax strong in the presence of God; and the doctrine of the priesthood shall distill upon thy soul as the dews from heaven. The Holy Ghost shall be thy constant companion, and thy scepter an unchanging scepter of righteousness and truth; and thy dominion shall be an everlasting dominion, and without compulsory means it shall flow unto thee forever and ever.

Confidence in the presence of God, a confidence sometimes mistaken for self-esteem or self-confidence and sometimes even called that when we talk about confidence, results from being virtuous and charitable, something the first elder really was. He had confidence because he had his eye single to the glory of God, because he knew of his own nothingness compared to that glory, because he was a faithful, obedient, and loving servant--because he was virtuous and charitable. But my companion didn't know of his nothingness by having an *image* of himself as nothing, by reflecting on that nothingness. He didn't have a negative self-image instead of a positive one. Instead, he was unconcerned about his image. He knew of his nothingness in depending on the Lord to do the work rather than depending on himself. My companion's knowledge of himself as nothing was a knowledge contained in his work and the way he went about that work, rather than a conceptual or reflective knowledge. His was knowledge as experience, the basic kind of knowledge, not knowledge as concept. He didn't have to say to himself "I am nothing," though if the occasion demanded it, as it did of Moses (Moses 1:10), he could have said that. Rather than explicit, reflective knowledge, my companion's knowledge of his nothingness was part and parcel of his trust in God and the resulting confidence. His knowledge of his nothingness was part and parcel of his charity and virtue.

In the verses from Doctrine and Covenants 121, *virtue* means not only chastity, but according to Webster's 1828 dictionary, in Joseph Smith's time it primarily meant strength, bravery, and moral excellence in general. *Charity*, of course, means love for others, as the context makes

clear. Thus, Doctrine and Covenants 121:45-46 tells us that if we have love for others and moral excellence, we will have confidence before God.

We sometimes speak of those who lack confidence as being unable to love others as they work with others and teach them, or even as unable to see their way out of their sins, but this scripture indicates we have things backwards when we talk that way. For confidence before God doesn't come first and then lead to a love for others and to virtue. Rather, love of others and virtue come first and lead to confidence before God--and who could lack confidence before mortals who has confidence before God?

If I love others, then even when I see their faults or their superiority to me in some respect, there is nothing to be ashamed or afraid of, nothing to hide, nothing to be careful about exposing. If I have charity; if I love others, I can be open and even bold. My companion could be confident because he was virtuous and because he loved; he loved others and he loved the Lord. His love and his virtue were his way of being a person, not aspects of an image of himself. That way of being a person carries with it the Lord's promise of confidence. The verses from Doctrine and Covenants 121 tell me that if I am loving and virtuous, I will also be confident.

On the other hand, they also imply that if I do not have confidence, it's because I lack either charity or virtue. That is perhaps even more surprising to us than that we get confidence by having virtue and by being loving. But that meaning is part of the scripture.

To see that, think about logic again. A parent might say to a child, "If you will study hard and do your best next semester, I will allow you to use the car on Friday evenings." Logically, the parent has also said, "If you aren't allowed to use the car on Friday evenings, it will be because either you didn't study hard or you didn't do your best." The two statements mean exactly the same thing. In the same way, in saying "if you have charity and virtue, then you will have confidence," this verse also says that a lack of confidence is a manifestation of a failure to be what the Lord would have me be, not just a "personality fault." If I am not confident, it is because I am not doing what I should be doing. If I lack confidence, then I am either uncharitable, unvirtuous, or both. My lack is to a fact about my personality--it is a fact about my behavior, about the way I live with other people.

A person may not be personally accountable for a failure in charity or virtue. A child berated by his parents and, as a result, lacking confidence (in other words, having a poor self-image) is not necessarily accountable for that lack of confidence. He may know nothing else. But if he wishes to have confidence he will have to learn to love his parents fully--to forgive them--and to have his thoughts garnished with virtue, in other words, clothed with excellence. If he does, Doctrine and covenants 121:45-46 promises that he will gain the confidence before the Lord and others that he needs.

Lack of confidence is a kind of fear, a fear, for example, that others will not accept me. But the scriptures teach us that when we love we do not fear. Moroni says, "I fear not what man can do; for perfect love casteth out all fear" (Moroni 8:16). And John says, "There is no fear in love; but perfect [the Greek word means "complete" or "whole"] love casteth out fear: because fear hath

torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love” (1 John 4:18). If we are loving and virtuous, we will have confidence before the Lord and, presumably, all others as well. That is why Jesus and Joseph Smith, though belittled, deserted, denied, and persecuted more than most of us can imagine, did not lose confidence. They loved fully and they were clothed in virtue.

Thus, Doctrine and Covenants 121:45-46 is a restatement of King Benjamin’s sermon: we do not get confidence on our own; it comes from the Lord when we act virtuously, when we repent and obtain a remission of our sins. When we remember the greatness of God and the nothingness of ourselves, when we remember it by our virtuous and charitable living, when we depend on the Lord, we receive the confidence we need as we receive all our other talents and fruits, as a gift:

Verily I say unto you, all among them who know their hearts are honest, and are broken, and their spirits contrite, and are willing to observe their covenants by sacrifice--yea, every sacrifice which I, the Lord, shall command--they are accepted of me. For I, the Lord, will *cause them to bring forth as a very fruitful tree* which is planted in a goodly land, by a pure stream, that yieldeth much precious fruit. (D&C 97:8-9; *emphasis added*)

It is the Lord, not we, who brings forth fruit in us when we yield to his work in his vineyard.

Consider Moses’ experience, described in Moses 1. There, with extraordinary confidence, he is able to say to Satan, “I am a son of God. . . where is thy glory, that I should worship thee?” (verse 13) only after he sees that he is nothing, which he--a prophet of God--had never supposed (verse 10). Obviously, recognizing his own nothingness has nothing to do with having a bad self-image or groveling in his nothingness. It is instead coming to a full realization of his dependence upon God, of his inability to save himself and of God’s merciful willingness to save him. That realization of his nothingness is also a realization of his relation to God as a child.

Consider too Moses’ experience before the burning bush. After receiving his call to lead Israel from bondage, Moses’ first question of the Lord is “Who am I?” Moses is concerned about his self-image. But the answer he receives has little to do with self-image, for the Lord says in reply, “I will be with thee” (Exodus 3:11-12). Moses is thinking of himself and he is doing so in terms of images--he wants a definition of himself--but God’s reply to him is not in terms of images or definitions at all. It is, instead, in terms of Moses’ relation to God: Moses is the one whom God is with.

Still not weaned from thinking in terms of images, Moses asks, “Who are you?” The reply he receives is even more startling--“I am that I am,” literally, “I will be what I will be” (Exodus 3:13-14). The Lord does not describe himself in terms of characteristics or attributes; he does not describe himself in terms of any image whatsoever. He simply is. He is the work he does in loving his children (Moses 1:39). He is what he needs to be, he is what he should be, he is what he is, and that is sufficient for it to be one of his most sacred names.

If we are to be like God, which we already are to some extent and which can be even more complete, we must give up our images and the images we are given by the world (see D&C 1:16); we must be in his image. One of the most common and heinous crimes committed by

ancient Israel was the worship of images, the worship of a thing rather than the Divine Person. We sometimes believe we are more sophisticated because we believe that we do not worship idols. In a remarkable prophetic essay in his *Ensign* message of July 1976, President Kimball pointed out some of the ways in which we do become idol worshipers. But idols like possessions, success, scientific progress, and military might aside, if we create images of ourselves, if we are not content to be like God in being without some determinate image--in being only whatever he would have us be by doing what he would have us do--we also have an idol, ourselves, and it too is a thing, not a person. If we are to be like him, we will submit our will to his. We will be what he has in mind for us to be, regardless of what we would like to be or what image we have of ourselves or what goals we have already set or what the world might think necessary. We will recognize his greatness and our own nothingness so that we, like Moses, Abraham, and Isaiah--in imitation of Christ--can say when he calls us, "Here I am--behold me here." That is genuine, saving confidence.