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Self-consciousness in the Church

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WHAT IS 'SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS'?

If you go to the dictionary for a definition of self-consciousness you will find this explanation: (1) Conscious of one's own acts or states as belonging to or originating in oneself; (2) uncomfortably conscious of oneself as an object of the observation of others.[1]

The first definition tells us that this experience happens inside the body. The second definition shows us that the flow of mental reflections that we call 'consciousness' and we associate with our personal self, also take place in the social domain. In social situations, self-consciousness is fundamentally an act of thinking about ourselves, but the problem is that when we think about ourselves, we cannot think of 'self' or 'you being you' without taking into account the relationship of 'yourself' with other people. In other words, you begin to think of what other people think of you, or what you would like them to think of you. It's quite clear then your 'self', your 'personal identity' has no meaning without human interactions.

From a clinical perspective, self-consciousness, has to do with what other people think of us, or say about us, or what we assume they think and or say about us. So anxiety in social situations is the result of excessive self-attention. In absolute solitude, the self-conscious person would be quite indifferent about his appearance and behaviour. But our life is intertwined with the lives of other people, and when excessive attention is given to this interaction, we become self-conscious.

MANIFESTATIONS OF SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS

There are two ways in which self-consciousness can manifest itself in social situations. (1) In some cases, self-conscious people get pleasure from the thought that what they say or do is being noticed by other people. Sometimes there are legitimate bases for thinking that people are captivated by their speech and actions. In other cases, the basis for this feeling is found in the imagination only. (2) For people who struggle with

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1   'Self-conscious' <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/self-conscious> [accessed 6 April 2023]

self-consciousness, the idea of being the object of attention is painful and embarrassing. They experience high levels of anxiety.

Thus, as religious workers, because of our concern for the spiritual and mental well-being of people in the local congregation, it is important to realise that self-consciousness is a very unpleasant feeling. Self-consciousness creates significant distress in personal relationships. However, the possibility of freedom from anxiety and avoidance behaviours, is God's greatest gift to the church. Human personality is not deterministic. It is possible to grow in freedom and self-confidence with God's help.

I will mention some theological strategies for living more effectively towards the end of this article.

For now I want to continue the discussion of the nature of self-consciousness. What is the cause of self-consciousness?

CAUSATION OF SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS

This question is not easy to answer. Self-consciousness is a complicated state of mind and body. And this complexity makes it difficult to isolate a single cause. The factors that contribute to self-consciousness are many. But for our purposes and for the sake of simplicity, I am going to say that one of the most noticeable causes of self-consciousness is fear. Practically, everyone who has studied the subject of self-consciousness agrees that fear, in one way or another, is involved in self-consciousness. When we realise that fear plays such a big role in human life, it's not difficult to understand why clinicians regard fear as one of main causes of social anxiety. We spend most of our conscious life trying to avoid things that we don't like. We live in fear. Fear keeps us in a constant state of alert. Some fears are part of our repertoire of instinctual urges or inherited responses to a hostile environment. This type of fear is a biological reflex that relates exclusively to our survival. If in Australia you see an angry kangaroo coming towards you, fear is an emotion that can save us from a terrible beating. This is an instinct of self-preservation. That motivates everybody. I don't need to go into details. Some fears, however, are self-imposed. They often develop in childhood, and they are technically called phobias. Very quickly, a phobia is anxiety associated with an object or situation that is not normally considered dangerous. People with phobias are unable to explain how they became afraid of the non-threatening objects. The fear of the self-conscious person is a special fear.

Those who are overly self-conscious fear themselves, and also experience intense fear and anxiety in social interactions. In case you are wondering what the difference is between fear and anxiety, the difference is that anxiety is the anticipation of situations perceived as threatening, and

fear is usually associated with the urge to escape. When these two emotional feelings overlap in the personality of the self-conscious person, they experience a panic attack.

Now, I have said that self-conscious people fear themselves. What do I mean by that? I simply mean that self-conscious people lack confidence in themselves. In many cases, this is due to the persistent habit of self-contempt, and the attitude of underestimating one's abilities. Although, self-conscious people are creative, and possess outstanding skills, they hesitate to take new challenges because they are afraid of themselves. They question themselves: Can I really do that? I don't know if I have what it takes? I fear what people will say about me? They will find me boring, stupid, awkward, and unlikable? But who are 'they'? 'They' are simply an imaginary group of people that you think will evaluate you negatively. Now do you see what I mean? A person, who experiences social anxiety, finds it difficult to put themselves in the way of new opportunities.

The worst enemy of personal achievement and growth is the fear of oneself. This fear brings doubt, and self-limitation. As you can see, if we fear ourselves, the fear of other people is always present in our mind.

The fear of people has two aspects, (1) When you have done something to make people angry, and (2) when you have done nothing to offend people.

If you have done something to make people upset, then your fear has some basis in reality. But if you haven't done anything to offend someone, there is no reason to feel anxious in social settings.

The fear of people is also related to the fear of an audience. This fear is usually caused by a visual rehearsal that happens long before the upcoming situation. You see the audience in your mind everyday. You see yourself in front of the audience; somehow they always appear to you as cruel, intimidating, and always ready to find something to criticise. The anxiety starts weeks before the social event. Even professional speakers or preachers can feel this fear. But someone might say: How can that be? They are professionals. They have been doing this for years! The answer is simple. If they have a reputation to maintain, there's always the fear that they'll let down the expectations of their audience. This can produce intense fear. The other extreme is when public speakers or preachers are so confident of their 'rhetorical skills' that they fail to notice weaknesses in the way they communicate things. But our main subject is not how to improve skills of public speaking, so let us come back to the topic of self-consciousness. The self-conscious person also has a fear of criticism. For this person, criticism is always unfair. They take it as a personal attack. So the self-conscious person tries to avoid anything that will cause them to be under the evaluation of others. I know that most people do not take

criticism very well. But people who are extremely sensitive to it overreact. The self-conscious person experiences the criticism as rejection. Possibly, because of deep-seated insecurities. But that's a subject for another time. I hope you have found this attempt to elucidate the psychology of self-awareness helpful.

ADDRESSING SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS: THE FEAR OF THE LORD

Now, I would like to say something about how to control the feeling of self-consciousness. We all want to live a life that is not limited by fear and anxiety, so how is this to be done? When Proverbs 9:10 came to my mind, I said to myself, this text is old, and well known. I don't think I can find anything new in it. Obviously, that was a hurried glance. The old maxims are often the wisest. The first thing we notice is that the control of fear begins with a specific mental attitude. According to the wisdom-teacher, that mental attitude is 'the fear of the Lord'. Let us look at what the text says again,

> 'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One understands.'

This 'fear of the Lord' is the first step to develop courage and joy in personal relationships.

This text is a call to action. What action? The preacher says: 'the fear of the Lord' is the beginning of wisdom.

In other words, the 'fear of the Lord' can displace the 'fear' that prevents us from enjoying fullness of life, *that* is the wisdom of God. The psychological implication here is interesting. Human beings don't like emotional vacuums. We must have basic emotions to get things done. We need attachments. If we don't have anything to hold on to, we feel empty. But total freedom from attachment is impossible. That is why we become obsessed with thoughts, objects, people, and other interests. Human development is really the constant replacement of one emotion with another. It's clear that if we're trying to displace social fear, we cannot leave the mind empty; otherwise another negative emotion will take that place.

So the Biblical solution for personal transformation is to introduce a new emotion. When the wisdom-teacher speaks about the 'fear of the Lord' he doesn't mean use more logic, or replace social fear by avoiding people or become more moralistic. It's wrong to think that we can stop self-consciousness by any of these strategies. Even if we resist, or build a defence against it, we're only creating more internal conflict. The best way

to get away from self-consciousness is by stimulating a spiritual emotion in the heart. So instead of worrying about what we assume people think of us, we should be more concerned about what God thinks of us. That's the starting point of personal change. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

The word 'beginning' is interesting. It assumes that behind the beginning there is a past. The way of wisdom recognises that past. But despite the past, and our symptoms of anxiety, and dysfunctional personalities, and moral limitations, the past is not an obstacle for a new beginning. With God we can start again. How do we start again? We start by asking two simple questions: Who is the Lord? And what is the fear of the Lord?

The first answer is that the Lord is the God of creation. And, therefore, He knows everything that he's created perfectly, including us. The Lord is also our Redeemer. I'm not going to talk about the problem of sin. We all know that there is a problem. But God found a way to help us overcome the things that we don't want. In fellowship with Christ, the Spirit changes our human nature. He renews the mind, especially the thoughts that paralyse us with human fear. The Lord is the Redeemer.

What then is fear of the Lord? Biblical fear is the recognition that God is a God of power and holiness. This recognition is not simply acceptance of theological statements about what God is, or a subscription to a particular creed. Personally, I love the precision and beauty of Reformed theology, but we along with other Christians cannot experience the transformative power of God without the fear of the Lord. Let me say it again, fear is a spiritual emotion. It comes from the volitional centre of the person renewed by the Spirit. That means a desire for the adjustment or conformity to the will of God. The fear of the Lord is a response to what we believe. It's building an emotion of complete submission to what you are convinced of. That's the way of wisdom.

So, how do I change? And where do I start? The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. But there is a past; a personal history that is ugly, and is constantly interfering with my present. How can I deal with that? The Christian God gives creative power to deal with that past in fellowship with Him. Not only that. As Christians we know full well that if we live in the fear of the Lord, we'll be on our way to the city of God with restored personalities. The way of wisdom brings moral beauty, courage, and the freedom to become socially integrated because we are growing in wholeness. In the last analysis, the only person who can go through life without anxiety is the person who fears the Lord.