

“*What Do You Think of Me? Why Do I Care?* by Dr. Ed Welch is a penetrating, gospel-centered, paradigm-shifting look at a sin pattern we all struggle with: elevating others to the status of God by seeking from them the acceptance and affirmation that only God in Christ can give us. Come have your desire for the love and praise of others reordered by this practical, well-written, and engaging book. By seeing God in his glory, and ourselves as bought with a price, we are freed to love others without the need to angle for their praise. And we are empowered to obey God’s radical command that (like him) we shower goodness even on our enemies.”

Dr. Alex Chediak, Associate Professor, California Baptist University; author of *Thriving at College: Make Great Friends, Keep Your Faith, and Get Ready for the Real World!*

“This is a book about me . . . about you . . . and about everyone else we know. It’s about the stuff that consumes us, our lives, our thoughts, and our time, even when we don’t realize it. It’s about the subtle, yet powerful lies we believe, and the things we pursue that not only wind up controlling us, but slowly drain us of life as it was meant to be. Ed Welch helps us understand our universal human struggles along with the antidote to those struggles, an antidote that will lead you into the liberating freedom of being fully human as you live to please the God who made you, rather than living to please others. This book is life-giving. And since God gives us limited years on his earth, it’s a book for those who are young to read sooner rather than later! I wish I had had this book forty years ago!”

Walt Mueller, Founder and President, Center for Parent/Youth Understanding; author of *Engaging the Soul of Youth Culture*

“The years between fifteen and twenty-five occasion most of the important decisions in our lives. Questions about sexuality, career choice, education, and marriage are usually answered during this decade. How do we help students and young adults connect with the truth of the gospel rather than running after affirmation from others who use cultural expectations as their guidelines? Ed Welch points to Jesus: ‘Jesus loved people more than he wanted to be loved by people. Jesus needed to love people more than he needed love from them.’ Amen.”

Rod Mays, National Coordinator, Reformed University Fellowship (RUF)

“Ed Welch is a treasured friend. Every time I am with him I feel encouraged, listened to, challenged, and understood. This book does the same thing. He not only helps us deal with the major issues of life, but Ed brings Scripture alive to help us experience God’s best for our lives.”

Jim Burns, Ph.D., President, HomeWord Center for Youth and Family; author of *Teenology* and *The Purity Code*

“In *What Do You Think of Me?*, Ed Welch carefully, surgically, exposes people-pleasing for what it is. He lets it be ugly—all sin is ugly!—and offers a much more satisfying vision rooted in the finished work of Jesus Christ. Whether you are young or old (but especially if you are young), you would do well to give this book a read.”

Tim Challies, Author of *The Next Story* and *The Discipline of Spiritual Discernment*

“As I read *What Do You Think of Me? Why Do I Care?*, I realized that it’s all about eyes. In a riveting, real-life, raw way, Ed Welch provides a spiritual eye exam. In language that captures the heart and soul of every human being who ever longed to be known and accepted, Ed shows us what’s normal, yet wrong, about our constant fear of the eyes of others. Then he gently, yet firmly, directs our gaze toward Jesus: all eyes on Jesus. That is the way of change. Finally, Ed points our focus onto others: they are our family who God equips us to love sacrificially. If you find that you’re always living squinty-eyed, focused only on what others think of you, then read Ed’s spiritual eye chart to see with clarity answers to your deepest questions about life and relationships.”

Robert W. Kellemen, Ph.D., Executive Director, Biblical Counseling Coalition; author of *God’s Healing for Life’s Losses*

“The sin that so easily entangles us all—living in light of what other people think of us. Ed Welch’s brilliant insights into this unavoidable struggle are exposed at a level that makes him a skillful surgeon of the heart. Welch invites us to re-examine the crux of the issue with a profound theology that is uniquely practical, informative, and gospel-centered. Working on the college campus where students live to impress other people, this book is now where I will turn to help pastor them through this struggle and embrace the fullness of the gospel that Welch so eloquently flushes out for us.”

Alex Watlington, Reformed University Fellowship (RUF) campus pastor at Penn State University

WHAT DO YOU THINK OF ME? WHY DO I CARE?

Answers to the Big Questions of Life

Edward T. Welch



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Introduction

A confession. I still care what other people think about me. A critical email or letter can get me down (though I honestly want you to offer critical comments about the book if you have any). When I feel like a failure, and at times there are good reasons for me to feel that way, I notice my instincts to either boast or hide. But—and this is an important but—I know what to do. I know where to turn. More and more I find these down times to be opportunities to grow, and I think I am growing.

My experience with my own problems is that a personal problem is one thing; the hopelessness that can attach to it makes it much harder. By hopelessness I mean that it seems like nothing can be done about the problem. Take any problem you might have, subtract your hopelessness, add a hefty portion of hope, and guaranteed, things will look very different. So I can promise you that you will, at least, find hope in what is ahead.

This book sounds some of the same themes of an earlier book, *When People Are Big and God Is Small*. After I wrote that book, I kept working with this material, and now seemed like an appropriate time to jot down some of that progress. In another twenty years, maybe I'll do it again.

As I wrote the book I was thinking about people I know who are roughly between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five. You don't have to be in this age span to read it. I have profited from writing and reading this book, and I am much older than twenty-five. But the book would sound a little different if I were writing to a fifty-year-old. I would probably write more about sagging stomachs, wrinkles, and divorces than teenage girls who decide to be vampires.

It is a great topic. There is nothing superficial about it. What you will find is that it goes directly to the critical questions of life, which means that the direction set out here can guide you through lots of other problems too. I hope that it provokes you, inspires you, guides you, gives you hope, and is just plain enjoyable.

The Problem

The Heart of the Matter
Who Is God?
Who Am I?
Who Are They?

The Problem

This will be a brief walk through a common problem. In order to make it worthwhile, your first task will be to find the problem in yourself. The problem—which will be labeled as the fear of others' opinions—shouldn't be difficult to identify because it is something you and every person in history has had to manage, tolerate, and struggle with. Once you find it, you will learn what to do with it, which should actually be enjoyable.

As you read, go ahead and mark up the pages with your questions, answers, and reactions. It will make it seem more like a conversation.

Somebody Is Watching

“Lord, please let me be normal.”

Okay, maybe you never actually prayed that, but you *do* want it. You want to fit in. Who doesn’t? Imagine you are invited to a formal dinner, but you didn’t read the entire invitation and you go in shorts and flip-flops. (Yes, it wasn’t pretty. I was also wearing a Killer Dana T-shirt—it’s the name of a surf shop, but the other dinner guests thought I was going gangsta.)

We all have these stories. We spend a lot of time concerned about fitting in, which means that we spend a lot of time thinking about our hair, our body, our intelligence, and our clothes so we can be part of the larger group. None of us want to be stared at if it means that the people looking at us don’t like what they see. When they look at us that way we want to run and hide.

Oh, and there is another prayer too. “Lord, please *don’t* let me be normal.” “If I can’t fit in, then I’ll be a vampire,” and she did just that. She figured that both fitting in and standing out were impossible, so she made a choice. Her parents would have preferred a more traditional route such as starting on the basketball team or high SAT scores. They are hoping it is a phase, which it is—there are not many

fifty-year-old vampires. But, unless she discovers something else to run her life, she will always be looking for ways to stand out, and she will be depressed.

We want to stand out from the crowd. We want to be seen, which means that we want people to notice us and be impressed with something. We want them to respect us, to like us, and to love us. Not too many people dream of being average. Take a look at your fantasies, and you will probably find a quest to be noticed.

- Have you ever imagined that you scored the winning basket in the NBA finals?
- Do you enjoy superhero movies because you like to imagine what it would be like to have such powers?
- Do you identify with a celebrity because you would like to live her life, at least for a year or two?
- Have you ever fantasized that you were famous or great?
- Or maybe you have already given up on greatness and will settle for a B+.

It's complicated, isn't it? If only we could be less controlled by the opinions of others. Maybe a deserted island could be the answer. That would be a pricey way to avoid the judgments of others, but it might work. Apart from that option, you have a creepy sense that people are watching, judging, evaluating, accepting, or rejecting you. Sometimes the eyes belong to no one in particular. Other times you know exactly who or what group you are trying to please. Either way, you are controlled by other people more than you think, and other people, of course, are controlled by how you see them.

The problem is a common one, but we don't talk about it too often. As a way to get it out into the open, keep trying to locate this in your own life.

- Do you buy clothes because of what other people will think? Have you ever not gone somewhere because you didn't have the right clothes or didn't like the way you looked?

- Do you spend a lot of time in front of the mirror?
- Do you avoid people, either because you are angry with them or because you would be embarrassed if they saw you?
- Do you ever get embarrassed to be seen with your parents?
- Have you ever been embarrassed at the thought of other people knowing that you go to church?
- Have you ever been embarrassed to say you believe in God?
- Have you ever been embarrassed to say you believe in Jesus?
- Do you ever exaggerate to make yourself look better?
- Do you feel like a failure sometimes? Do you hate school because from the moment you walk in you feel like a failure?
- Are you afraid to ask questions in class because you might look stupid?
- Do you wish you were thinner, stronger, taller, shorter, smarter, faster, or better looking?
- Have you ever been jealous of someone thinner, stronger, taller, shorter, smarter, faster, or better looking?
- Have you ever wished you could shrivel up and disappear?

Agreed, these questions are too easy. You might hesitate on one or two of them, but basically the answer is yes across the board, and they are that way for everyone. They all point to how we can be too controlled by the opinions of others. Why do you think everyone struggles with it? Where does it come from?

One of the riskiest things in life is to like someone—*really* like someone. It all starts innocently. You find yourself attracted to another person. Happens all the time. No big deal. But then the attraction grows, and amid the glow of romantic feelings lurks a monster:

what if you like the other person more than the other person likes you? *What will he or she think about me?* you wonder.

You send some friends out on a reconnaissance mission. Their job is to find out if the other person likes you *without* that person knowing your intentions. If word comes back yes, you can move toward that person safely. If the answer is no, you lick your wounds, thankful for the heads-up that saved you from total embarrassment. In your everyday life, the potential for rejection is enormous. It's amazing that so many people actually get out of bed in the morning. Sound familiar?

Success can't protect you. Steven King, the ridiculously prolific and famous horror writer, was told by Miss Hisler, his school principal, "What I don't understand, Stevie, is why you write junk like this in the first place." At the time, he was already writing scary stories that other students were willing to pay to read. "I was ashamed," he says of the incident. "I have spent a good many years since—too many, I think—being ashamed about what I write."* You too have probably heard words like Miss Hisler's, and they are still etched inside your soul. Can you think of some?

Look around a little more and you will see it—it goes by many names: a desire for acceptance, the fear of rejection, painful self-consciousness, or peer pressure. You can see it when you or any of your friends take muscle-enhancing steroids or illegal drugs. You see it in anorexia, bulimia, and depression. You find it in people who are sexually active before or outside of marriage.

- What will they think of me?
- What might they think about me?

* Stephen King, *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft* (New York: Scribner, 2000), 49–50.

- How can I be accepted?
- How can I be loved?

The evidence is everywhere. If you can't relate to any of this, here is a sure way to find it.

- Do you think you're especially attractive?
- Are you supercompetitive? Do you hate to lose? (And do you usually win?)
- Would you say you are self-confident?

There it is again: a life that is always judged by others. The only difference is that, at least for the moment, the judges score you highly. Yet it is even more complicated. Deep down those who are super self-confident don't believe the judges' high scores. They feel like failures—frauds who are barely fooling other people. Do you think beautiful celebrities struggle with feeling judged and unaccepted by others? Count on it.

Some people seem more self-confident or at least less self-conscious than others. It's hard to know exactly why, but everyone can easily recall times when they withered under the rejection (or possible rejection) of other people.

I know, I know. You were trying to manage this perfectly common experience by ignoring it, and somebody (me) comes along and makes an issue out of it. But my purpose is not to make you miserable. Stick with it, because this particular problem is actually a window into the mysteries of the universe. It takes you directly to three questions that every human being must answer: Who am I? Who is God? and Who are you? And there is no way I would invite you down this road unless the road was very good.