

Feature Article: DS210

## A NEW REFORMATION? THE FAULTY GOSPEL OF ROBERT SCHULLER

by Joseph P. Gudel

This article first appeared in *Forward* (now renamed the *Christian Research Journal*) volume 8, number 1 (1985). For further information or to subscribe to the *Christian Research Journal* go to: <http://www.equip.org>

“Why would any Christian write an article criticizing Dr. Schuller? Isn’t this being negative? Isn’t this being unloving?” These and similar questions are raised automatically by many people whenever one Christian criticizes another Christian, especially when the one criticized is as notable and well liked as Dr. Robert Schuller.

I believe the first question raised above will be answered as we examine the content of Dr. Schuller’s theology. To test or criticize someone whose teachings are aberrational is not being negative; in fact the Bible commands us to do this. When the Apostle Paul wrote to the Christians in Thessalonica, he told them to “test all things; hold fast to that which is good” (1 Thess. 5:21).

The question still remains: “Is this unloving?” The most unloving thing that we could do would be to close our eyes and turn our backs as untold numbers of people are being led astray by false teaching. To critique a Christian who has erred from the truth is the most loving thing we could do for him. The Apostle James wrote: “My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth, and one turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death, and will cover a multitude of sins” (James 5:19-20).

### DR. SCHULLER’S THEOLOGY

Dr. Schuller has stated many times throughout his many years of ministry that his one goal, his main desire, is to reach the masses of unchurched people. When he and his wife first arrived in California, they wondered how they could build a church from scratch.

Who would come to our church?... Looking at some statistics, it was very plain that half the people in the U.S. had no religious affiliation. Our answer then came quickly and clearly. The unchurched thousands— this was our opportunity. We would have to impress and win the people who, for one reason or another, had never before been interested in organized religion.<sup>1</sup>

So Dr. Schuller believes that his calling is that of a missionary. “My ministry has, for over thirty years, been a mission to the unbelievers.”<sup>2</sup> And as we are about to see, he does not believe that the way to reach them is by proclaiming the gospel.

How does Dr. Schuller believe we can reach the nonbelievers most effectively? The most important thing is to find out what they want! He did this for several years at the beginning of his California ministry. And what did he discover? He found out that nonbelievers wanted to have their emotional needs met: they did not want to hear about the Bible or about their need for forgiveness of sins and salvation.

As a missionary, I find the hope of respectful contact is based on a “human-need” approach rather than a theological attack .... The non-churched who have no vital belief in a relationship with God will spurn, reject, or simply ignore the theologian, church spokesperson, preacher, or missionary who approaches with Bible in hand, theology on the brain and the lips, and expects nonreligious persons to suspend their doubts and swallow the theocentric assertions as fact.<sup>3</sup>

## POSSIBILITY THINKING VS. NEGATIVE THINKING

Since Dr. Schuller will not preach the gospel from the pulpit, nor teach from the Bible, what then is the message he propagates? *Los Angeles Times* staff writer Bella Stumbo, after an extended interview with Dr. Schuller, wrote: "In short, Robert Schuller believes that God placed him on this Earth to preach possibility thinking."<sup>4</sup>

Anyone who is familiar with Dr. Schuller's writings or who has listened to him speak will realize that this is not an exaggeration.

Throughout his ministry Dr. Schuller has been outspoken in warning his listeners about the dangers of negative thinking. He asks his audience to consider "that dirty ten-letter-word 'impossible.' When uttered aloud, this word is devastating in its effect. Thinking stops. Progress is halted."<sup>5</sup> Elsewhere he states: "Whatever you do, never verbalize a negative emotion."<sup>6</sup>

The gospel that he wants to share with his unchurched audience is that they can do anything that they want to, that everything is possible for a "possibility thinker."

There is no problem or situation that cannot be solved.<sup>7</sup>

... success awaits the man who will "never say never."<sup>8</sup>

... this is what I think our ministry is all about. Helping people realize they can become more than they ever thought they could be!<sup>9</sup>

To underscore just how vitally important this message is, Dr. Schuller once wrote: "I believe in positive thinking. It is almost as important as the resurrection of Jesus Christ"<sup>10</sup> In addition, the titles to some of his books are revealing: *Move Ahead With Possibility Thinking*, *You Can Become the Person You Want to Be*, *It's Possible*, and *Become a Possibility Thinker Now...*

### The Gospel of Success

Closely connected with his emphasis on "possibility thinking" is his teaching concerning success. Dr. Schuller believes that God wants us to succeed in whatever we do.

God's will for you is clear.... God wants you to succeed. He has promised to "crown your efforts with success..." (Prov. 3:6)<sup>11</sup>

Who owns the cattle on a thousand hills, mines of ore that have never been discovered, and is waiting to make millionaires out of simple farm boys? Take Christ as your Partner and give Him a chance to work the miracle He promised: "I am come that you might have life—and have it more abundantly."<sup>12</sup>

If you fail, you do so because you choose to fail!<sup>13</sup>

Although in recent years Dr. Schuller has somewhat tempered this teaching, it is still one of his major tenets.

### Self-Esteem: A New Reformation

The prime focus of Dr. Schuller's ministry today concerns the self-esteem of the individual. This was reflected in most of his earlier books, but was never specifically formulated until 1982, when he wrote *Self-Esteem: The New Reformation*. Dr. Schuller believes that virtually every problem a person has, every ill that plagues society, all sin and evil in the world, is a result of people having low self-esteem. Therefore, our greatest need is to have our self-esteem increased.

Self-esteem then, or "pride in being a human being," is the single greatest need facing the human race today.<sup>14</sup>

I strongly suggest that self-love is the ultimate will of man—that what you really want more than anything else in the world is the awareness that you are a worthy person.<sup>15</sup>

Do not fear pride: the easiest job God has is to humble us. God's almost impossible task is to keep us believing every hour of every day how great we are as his sons and daughters on planet earth.<sup>16</sup>

According to Schuller, in order to reach the multitudes of nonbelievers today, a new reformation is needed, a reformation based on building up their self-esteem. This reformation must be anthropocentric, that is, man-centered, not theocentric, or God-centered. Indeed, Dr. Schuller believes that classical theology seriously errs in insisting that all theology be centered around God instead of around man.<sup>17</sup>

### The Bible

One might legitimately ask why Dr. Schuller believes classical theology errs so gravely. His answer: Luther and Calvin were listening to the wrong person! He asks the following rhetorical question:

Luther and Calvin, we know, looked to the Book of Romans in the Bible for their primary inspiration. Were they, unknowingly, possessed more by the spirit of St. Paul than by the Spirit of Jesus Christ? Are we not on safer grounds if we look to our Lord's words to launch our reformation?<sup>18</sup>

The implication is that what Jesus said in the gospels overrides everything else in the Bible. For Schuller, then, some parts of the Bible (i.e., what Jesus said as recorded in the gospels) have more authority than other areas of the Bible. In other parts of *Self-Esteem: The New Reformation*, Dr. Schuller is more explicit.

But can anything be above the Scriptures? Yes, the Eternal Word transcends the written Word. Christ is the Word made flesh. Christ is the Lord over the Scriptures; the Scriptures are not Lord over Christ . . . The Bible must not compete with the Lord for the seat of glory. We are "saved by the blood," not "by the Book." We believe in the holy Trinity, not a holy Quadrangle.<sup>19</sup>

Christ must be, at all times, Lord over the Scriptures.<sup>20</sup>

### Sin and Man's Nature

For Dr. Schuller, sin, a subject he does not like to discuss, has a definition very different from the one most Christians give.

I am convinced that the deepest of all human needs is salvation from sin and hell .... We come now to the problem of semantics. What do I mean by sin? Answer: Any human condition or act that robs God of glory by stripping one of his children of their right to divine dignity. I could offer another complementing answer, "Sin is that deep lack of trust that separates me from God and leaves me with a sense of shame and unworthiness." I can offer still another answer: "Sin is any act or thought that robs myself or another human being of his or her self-esteem."<sup>21</sup>

Any analysis of "sin" or "evil"... that fails to see the lack of self-dignity as the core of the problem will prove to be too shallow.<sup>22</sup> Classical Reformed Theology declares that we are conceived and born rebellious sinners. But that answer is too shallow.

It ignores the tough question: Why should love-needing persons resist, rebel against, and reject beautiful love? The answer? We are born nontrusting. Deep down we feel we are not good enough to approach a holy God.<sup>23</sup>

By implication then, man is basically good according to Dr. Schuller. His only problem is that he was born with a disability: this disability, or original sin, is a low self-esteem or lack of trust.<sup>24</sup>

If only we could love ourselves enough to dare approach God .... But we feel too unworthy. So one layer of negative behavior is laid upon another until we emerge as rebellious sinners. But our rebellion is a reaction, not our nature. By nature we are fearful, not bad. Original sin is not a mean streak; it is a nontrusting inclination .... do not say that the central core of the human soul is wickedness. If this were so, then truly, the human being is totally depraved. But positive Christianity does not hold to human depravity, but to human inability.<sup>25</sup>

Dr. Schuller does not believe or teach that we are ultimately responsible for our sins. He attempts to distinguish between what he calls "Adam's Sin" and "Original Sin." Adam, created sinless, knew better. Only he deserved a sermon on sin, because he alone had a choice. Adam "... made a choice, he chose. He knew better. His children, however, were born with a disadvantage. They didn't have that choice."<sup>26</sup>

Because we are basically fearful, but not bad, and because we need to have our self-esteem lifted, Jesus never criticized people or called them sinners, according to Dr. Schuller. Instead, he always tried to uplift them.

He never did call them “sinners.” He saw great possibilities in each of these men. How He tried to give them the sense of self-worth and dignity that they deserved! After all, they were human beings, descendants of God.<sup>27</sup>

Christ always tried to give man’s self-image a boost. When he met immoral people He never called them sinners. Never!<sup>28</sup>

He believed in the dignity of the individual. So He never called a person a sinner. He always saw the individual as a saint.<sup>29</sup>

So Dr. Schuller believes that if Jesus never called people sinners, then he won’t either.

### **Man and Glory**

The end result that Dr. Schuller hopes to accomplish is to show everyone that they are all children of God because they are all made in His image. “The Fatherhood of God is built into our subconscious,”<sup>30</sup> all we really need is enough self-esteem to accept this fact. But it does not stop there. Because “we were created to be princes and princesses,”<sup>31</sup> we have an innate “thirst for glory.”<sup>32</sup> Dr. Schuller believes that “what we need is a theology of salvation that begins and ends with a recognition of every person’s hunger for glory.”<sup>33</sup> “The Christian faith and life is a gospel designed to glorify human beings for the greater glory of God.”<sup>34</sup> The final goal is that “we can pray, ‘Our Father in heaven, honorable is our name.’”<sup>35</sup>

### **Salvation and the Gospel**

In concluding our examination of Dr. Schuller’s theology we must see what he has to say about salvation and the gospel. First of all, he stresses that people will not respond to the gospel until they recognize that they are worthy of God. “The unsaved person cannot perceive himself as worthy of ‘divine grace’ and hence rejects it.”<sup>36</sup> In fact, Dr. Schuller believes that the ultimate sin is in feeling unworthy about yourself: “the most serious sin is the one that causes me to say, ‘I am unworthy. I may have no claim to divine sonship if you examine me at my worst.’”<sup>37</sup>

Dr. Schuller believes, then, that God wants to build up man’s self-esteem and restore the lost glory that is our inherent right as children of God, as people “created to be princes and princesses.”<sup>38</sup> “God’s ultimate objective is to turn you and me into self-confident persons.”<sup>39</sup>

In accord with this, Dr. Schuller believes that any proclamation of the gospel that puts “a person down before it attempts to lift him up” is dangerous.<sup>40</sup> He goes on to state that “you are not preaching the Gospel unless you make people happy, because the Gospel is good news.”<sup>41</sup>

Finally, what is salvation in Schuller’s opinion? What does it mean to be “born again”?

What does it mean to be saved? It means to be permanently lifted from sin (psychological self-abuse with all of its consequences as seen above) and shame to self-esteem and its God glorifying human need-meeting, constructive, and creative consequences.<sup>42</sup>

Salvation is defined as rescue from shame to glory.<sup>43</sup>

To be born again means that we must be changed from a negative to a positive self-image—from inferiority to self-esteem, from fear to love, from doubt to trust.<sup>44</sup>

And what is the real effect of being saved? “Glory restored is the real fruit of salvation.”<sup>45</sup>

## **A BIBLICAL CRITIQUE**

### **A Faulty Foundation**

A building is only as strong as its foundation, and every argument stands or falls on its premises. In Dr. Schuller’s case we can readily see that his entire ministry is based upon a defective premise. What is it? He has knowingly based and structured his theology on what people wanted to hear! It began with him going from door to door, asking people what type of church they would like to attend.<sup>46</sup> It has continued to this day, albeit more sophisticatedly, with Dr. Schuller hiring firms like the Gallup Poll to conduct surveys on such pertinent topics as self-esteem of the American people.<sup>47</sup> Instead of asking himself what the people needed, he asked what they wanted. Sometimes these two are in agreement, but

more often they are not. Instead of listening to the people, or even to himself, he should have asked God what the people needed and how he could help them obtain it!

Imagine someone like the prophet Jonah going to Nineveh and telling the people only the good things that they wanted to hear. After all, he could have reasoned, they would never listen to some foreigner preaching negative sermons. Why, none of the Ninevites even believed in the Jewish Scriptures. The result of this type of approach would have meant the destruction of Nineveh and all of its inhabitants.

A theology based upon opinion polls rather upon God's Word is a direct fulfillment of what the Apostle Paul warned against: "For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires." (2 Tim. 4:3).

### **Possibility Thinking**

The teaching advanced by Dr. Schuller is clear. You can be whatever you want to be, all you have to do is believe in yourself. Any and every problem you encounter can be overcome, just never quit. "Set your goal, define your role, and pay your toll."<sup>48</sup> "What you can conceive, you can achieve."<sup>49</sup> And above all, never verbalize a negative thought or admit that something is impossible.

As we have seen, the teaching of "possibility thinking" is a cornerstone of Dr. Schuller's theology. And in and of itself, there is nothing wrong with this. After all, there are many biblical verses which affirm this. For example:

For nothing will be impossible with God (Luke 1:37).

And Jesus said to him, "'If you can.' All things are possible to him who believes" (Mark 9:23).

There are several problems, however, with how Dr. Schuller presents this. First of all, his emphasis is virtually indistinguishable from the same type of teachings given in secular circles (e.g., Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People*). The only difference is that Dr. Schuller builds his message within a theistic framework. The problem lies in the fact that the biblical promises of God's help apply only to those people who have a living relationship with God; that is, people who have accepted Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. But Dr. Schuller admits that the main group of people he is trying to reach is non-Christians! Therefore, his "possibility thinking" teachings from the Bible really would not apply to them.

Second, in teaching that we can do anything that we can dream of, Dr. Schuller totally ignores the fact that we do have limitations. All of us are limited by our own natural abilities and by outside influences over which we have no control.

A final flaw in this type of teaching is that there are times when we must say unpleasant things or "verbalize negative emotions." According to Dr. Schuller, the Apostle Peter would probably be one of the world's greatest possibility thinkers. Why? Remember when Jesus began to tell his disciples that He had to go to Jerusalem and suffer many things and be killed (cf. Matt. 16:21f)? What was Peter's reaction? He took Jesus aside and lectured Him on the dangers of negative thinking.

And Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This shall never happen to You" (Matt. 16:22).

We all know the rest of the story, Jesus rebuked Peter for not setting his "mind on God's interests, but man's." Elsewhere, Jesus actually commands us, under certain conditions, to verbalize negative emotions. "Be on your guard. If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him" (Luke 17:3).

The danger of Dr. Schuller's teaching on "possibility thinking" is that he only shows one side of the coin and thus distorts God's message.

### **The Gospel of Success**

In attempting to marshal together biblical evidence to back his claims that God wants us to succeed in whatever we do, Dr. Schuller has taken one verse after another out of context. For example: "God's will for you is clear .... God wants you to succeed. He has promised to 'crown your efforts with success!'" (Prov. 3:6).<sup>50</sup>

It is no accident that Dr. Schuller quotes Proverbs 3:6 from The Living Bible, which is a paraphrase, not a translation. Proverbs 3:6, according to the Hebrew Masoretic text, reads: "In all thy ways acknowledge Him. And he will *direct thy paths*."<sup>51</sup> The Hebrew word for "direct" is "yashar," meaning "To go straight or direct in the way" or "to make (a way) straight"<sup>52</sup> Thus God is promising to guide us as we walk with Him, not to make us succeed in everything we do.

Many examples could be cited to show Dr. Schuller's frequent distortion of scriptural passages in order to justify his theological positions. For instance, what does Dr. Schuller say Jesus really meant when He taught His disciples to pray for their "daily bread" (Matt. 6:11)?

"Give us our daily bread." What does the word "bread" mean? Bread refers to life's basic needs. God doesn't promise that we will get the dessert, but he does promise that we will have the crust.... What is the crust that God offers? We call it possibility thinking.<sup>53</sup>

"Give us this day our daily bread." God will give us what we need. And what is that? It is creative, inspiring, possibility-pregnant ideas.<sup>54</sup>

Dr. Schuller is guilty of even more blatant distortion when he equates the "rivers of living water" Jesus referred to in John 7:38 with self-esteem.

And I can feel the self-esteem rising all around me and within me. "Rivers of living water shall flow from the inmost being of anyone who believes in me" (John 7:38, TLB). I'll really feel good about myself.<sup>55</sup>

Did Jesus really equate "rivers of living water" with "self-esteem"? The Apostle John (who I think was in a better position to tell us what Jesus meant than Dr. Schuller is) tells us exactly what Jesus was saying: "But this He spoke of the Spirit, whom those who believed in Him were to receive: for the Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified" (John 7:39).

More examples could be cited showing how Dr. Schuller takes verses out of context and/or distorts their meaning, but these will suffice.

One of the most lamentable aspects of Dr. Schuller's "Gospel of Success" is in the effect it can have on people who genuinely try but fail. For people like this I cannot think of anything more pernicious than to tell them that "if you fail, you do so because you choose to fail."<sup>56</sup> William Kirk Kilpatrick, associate professor of educational psychology at Boston College, makes the following observation:

If you lead people to believe that by the power of their mind they can become rich and change their life, and if in fact that doesn't happen, not only are they going to feel frustration but also more guilt for not having enough faith.<sup>57</sup>

Christians may oftentimes be successful in their earthly endeavors, but God has not promised this to us. In fact, many of the greatest men and women of faith were total failures in the world's eyes (cf. Heb. 11:35-40). Worldly success may be a byproduct of obedience to God, but it should never be our primary goal.

### **Self-Esteem: A New Reformation?**

We must first address the question, is it wrong to have high self-esteem? The biblical answer is no! In the book of Genesis we are told that man was created in God's own image (Gen. 1:26-27). In other places the Scriptures state that "we are the temple of the living God" (2 Cor. 6:16), and that we are "sons and daughters" of God (2 Cor. 6:18). In Eph. 2:10, we are told that "we are His workmanship." The word "workmanship" comes from the Greek word "poiema" from which we get our English word "poem". Just as a poem is an artistic expression of the poet, so we are artistic expressions of God. How unique and special is each person? When a baby is conceived,

it will be a combination of the genetic content of one of the mother's 400 ova with those of one of, say, 360 million spermatozoa released at the same time. The child you conceived might have been any one of about 144 billion distinct human beings, assuming that all of the spermatozoa really had an equal chance to fertilize that ovum. The slightest difference in the timing of the sex act would have tipped the odds in favor of a different spermatozoon—and resulted in a different child. No other couple could produce a child identical to yours.<sup>58</sup>

Truly King David was right when he proclaimed: "I will give thanks to Thee, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made" (Ps. 139:14).

There must be a proper balance in our evaluation of man. We need to see ourselves as God sees us. How does God view man? He sees us as beings of tremendous value and worth. In John 3:16 the word "so" is often overlooked: God loved us *so* much that He sent Jesus to die for our sins, that we could be reconciled with him.

Once again, however, there is a flip side to the coin. God sees us as His creations (not as His peers) who have willingly rebelled against Him. Dr. Schuller rejects this fact in his evaluation. He believes that the greatest need of man is having his self-esteem built up,<sup>59</sup> therefore we should never say anything derogatory about man. Man's main goal, he believes, should be seeking to have his self-esteem built up high enough that he can respond to God's love. The only reason people do not accept God is because they have a low self-esteem and thus fear Him.<sup>60</sup>

The main question is, "Is Dr. Schuller's analysis of man's problem correct?" We will consider the scriptural answer to this in the following sections dealing with "Man's Nature" and "Jesus and Sinners." Right now, though, I believe that simply by looking at the evidence before us we can see that Dr. Schuller's logic is faulty.

Lewis Smedes, a professor at Fuller Seminary and the author of *Love within Limits*, makes the following cogent observation:

I have seen a hit man of the Mafia who says "I feel very good about myself." I have talked to prostitutes who have felt very good about themselves, and I'm not judging them, but I have talked to saints who felt very badly about themselves. The crux in this whole business is not whether we feel good about ourselves, though that is important, but what is the truth about ourselves?<sup>61</sup>

If Dr. Schuller is correct, if the only reason we run from God is because we have a low self-esteem and fear Him, then people who have a high self-esteem should all become Christians and also should not sin anymore! But we know from practical experience that this is not the case.

William Kirk Kilpatrick states that a high self-esteem often inhibits people from coming to God:

Like the rich man who will have such a hard time getting into heaven, his riches protect him from the knowledge of how utterly dependent on God he is. In the same way the man who is brimful of self-esteem is unable to see how utterly broken he is, how we all are.<sup>62</sup>

It is both interesting and significant that recent psychological studies have confirmed what the Bible has always taught: man's problem is not low self-esteem but rather pride. While at times this is expressed in low self-esteem it is also very often manifested as an inflated self-image. Dr. David Myers, a professor of psychology at Dr. Schuller's alma mater, Hope College, comments on this in his article, "The Inflated Self."

[W]hat an intriguing irony it is that so many Christian writers are now echoing the old prophets of humanistic psychology at the very time that research psychologists are amassing new data concerning the pervasiveness of pride. Indeed it is the orthodox theologians, not the humanistic psychologists, who seem closest to the truth that is glimpsed by social psychology.<sup>63</sup>

Church history also refutes Dr. Schuller's teaching on self-esteem. He believes that we are entering a "new age of church growth" and that the only way the Church can succeed is to build up people's allegedly low self-esteem.<sup>64</sup> Dr. Schuller must answer a significant question: why didn't the early Church preach a theology of self-esteem? They were virtually surrounded by nonbelievers, people whose greatest need, according to Dr. Schuller, was to have their self-esteem lifted. However, the early Church followed the example of Paul, and preached "Christ and Him crucified" not any gospel of self-esteem (e.g., 1 Cor. 2:2; 1:18,23; Rom. 3:10-18). We find no examples in the preaching of the apostles that man's basic problem was a low self-esteem. Instead we find that it is a need for forgiveness of his sins.

### **An Anthropocentric Theology?**

As we have seen, Dr. Schuller believes that the Reformers seriously erred in centering their theology around God instead of around man. The verse people like Dr. Schuller usually cite to support that

teaching is Mark 12:31, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Their argument is that we must first learn to love ourselves, to have our own self-esteem built up, and only then can we love others.

But what is the context of this verse? A scribe came up to Jesus and asked Him what was the greatest commandment.

Jesus answered, "The foremost is, 'Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.'

'The second is this, You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these" (Mark 12:29-31).

Two things stand out from Jesus' words. The first is that, according to Jesus, our theology must be primarily God-centered, not man-centered, because the first commandment was to love God with everything we have. The second thing that stands out is that we were *not* commanded to love ourselves. We are commanded to love our neighbor *just as* we love ourselves. This agrees with what the Apostle Paul wrote: "For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it" (Eph. 5:29).

In truth, a theology that is centered around man inescapably becomes a not-so-subtle attempt at self-worship. A theology that is based on self-esteem is really only a new narcissism. In *Beyond Personality* which was first published at the same time Dr. Schuller was an undergraduate at Hope College, C.S. Lewis succinctly critiqued and destroyed any attempt at a theology based on man's self-esteem.

Christ will indeed give you a real personality: but you must not go to Him for the sake of that. As long as your own personality is what you are bothering about you are not going to Him at all. The very first step is to try to forget about the self altogether. Your real, new self (which is Christ's and also yours, and yours just because it is His) will not come as long as you are looking for it. It will come when you are looking for Him .... Look for yourself, and you will find in the long run only hatred, loneliness, despair, rage, and decay. But look for Christ and you will find Him, and with Him everything else thrown in.<sup>65</sup>

### Pride

Along with telling us that our greatest need is a high self-esteem and that our theology must be man-centered, Dr. Schuller has also said that we do not have to worry about pride.

Do not fear pride: the easiest job God has is to humble us.<sup>66</sup>

But the Bible warns believers against pride and exhorts Christians to practice humility as a safeguard against pride:

Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before stumbling (Prov. 16:18).

... and all of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble (1 Pet. 5:5).

In the book of Isaiah we find that Lucifer, the "star of the morning," was cast down from his eminent position because of the great pride that he possessed (Isa. 14:10-14). His end result was to be "thrust down to Sheol, to the recesses of the pit" (v. 15).

### The Bible

One of the reasons Dr. Schuller has drawn so much criticism is that his theology and teachings are not based on the Bible. In fact, as we have just seen, they are oftentimes diametrically opposed to what the Bible says in context. He believes that Jesus' words are the only safe basis within which we can build any theological framework.<sup>67</sup> In one place in *Self-Esteem: The New Reformation* he writes:

A simple and very wise man once said: "If you really want to know a person's deepest desire and most conscientious concern, study, if you can, his unvarnished prayers. Stealthily approach him in his intimate closet and try to overhear what he is really praying about passionately."<sup>68</sup>

I think that this is excellent advice. To find out what our view of the Bible should be, we will look at what Jesus said about Scripture, and we will begin by looking at one of the most passionate prayers Jesus ever uttered, His prayer to His Father, just before His passion and death.

In John 17 Jesus is praying for His disciples, whom He will soon be leaving. He asks His Father to "Sanctify them in the truth; *Thy word is truth*" (John 17:17).

Jesus evidently believed that all of God's word is truth, not just part of it! Just before this, Jesus stated that He had guarded His disciples and that none of them had perished except Judas, "the son of perdition, *that the Scripture might be fulfilled*" (verse 12). Again, Jesus plainly believed that whatever the Scriptures said would take place, would.

In John 10:35 Jesus stated that "the Scripture cannot be broken." In Matthew 5:18 He said "until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass away from the Law, until all is accomplished."

Dr. Schuller's grave error is that he attempts to make a dichotomy between Jesus' words and the rest of the Bible. He claims to base his teachings and his hope for "new reformation" on what Jesus said. In reality, he simply accepts the sayings of Jesus that he agrees with and ignores the rest!

## Sin

Perhaps the most insidious aspect of Dr. Schuller's teaching method is the way he redefines biblical terms at will. A prime example of this is how he redefines sin. According to Dr. Schuller, sin is anything that robs us of our "divine dignity" or, sin is a "deep lack of trust."<sup>69</sup> According to the Bible, though, sin is rebellion and lawlessness on man's part.

... sin is the transgression of the law (1 John 3:4).

All unrighteousness is sin (1 John 5:17).

Jesus gave another definition of sin. He said that when the Holy Spirit came, He would convict the world "concerning sin, because they do not believe in Me" (John 16:9). Thus sin is defined as any refusal to believe in Jesus.

Dr. Schuller believes that we should never discuss people's sins, because to do so would be an insult to their dignity. R.C. Sproul addresses this type of attitude in his book *In Search of Dignity*:

There is a road to redemption where every human being has dignity. Many reject this road because they think Christianity destroys self-esteem, disparaging human value with woeful denunciations of the evil of man. Preachers rail against corruption, calling man a wretched sinner. Did not David cry out, "I am a worm and not a man" and Job grovel in the dust moaning, "I hate myself"?

These grim statements make it seem that Christianity has a low view of human dignity. But the point often overlooked is that *the character of sinfulness in no way diminishes the worth of persons*. It is because humanity is so valuable that God takes sin seriously . . . .

By taking sin seriously we take man seriously. Evil may mar the divine image and cloud its brilliance, but it cannot destroy it. The image can be defaced, but it can never be erased. The most obscene symbol in human history is the cross: yet in its ugliness it remains the most eloquent testimony to human dignity.<sup>70</sup>

If we Christians, especially the leaders who are shepherds in the Church, are ever going to help anyone, we must start by being honest. This means that we do not close our eyes to mankind's true condition. We need to have the courage to speak "the truth in love" (Eph. 4:15).

## Man's Nature

What is man's true condition? Dr. Schuller believes that man is basically good. "By nature we are fearful, not bad."<sup>71</sup> What does the Bible say?

The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it? (Jer. 17:9).

There is none righteous, not even one; there is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God; all have turned aside, together they have become useless: there is none who does good, there is not even one (Rom. 3:10-12).

For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh (Rom. 7:18).

## Jesus and Sinners

Perhaps one of the most incredible statements Dr. Schuller has ever made is that Jesus never called anyone a sinner. He reasons that if Jesus never called people sinners, then neither should he. This is a perfect example of how Dr. Schuller picks and chooses from among the words of Jesus, accepting only what *he* likes and leaving the rest. Did Jesus ever call people sinners? Yes, many times.

I said therefore to you, that you shall die in your sins; for unless you believe that I am He, you shall die in your sins (John 8:24).

He who is without sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone at her (John 8:7).

And hearing this, Jesus said to them, "It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick; I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners" (Mark 2:17).

Jesus knew what type of a heart each person had (cf. John 2:24-25). If they were genuinely repentant for their sins, He would forgive them and then lift them up. But if they were hardhearted and antagonistic, Jesus would speak very harshly to them. Dr. Schuller does not believe this: "Jesus, when he confronted secular unbelievers as well as conspicuous sinners, still refrained from insulting or embarrassing them. He left their dignity intact."<sup>72</sup>

Once again Dr. Schuller purposely ignores the parts of the Bible that he finds distasteful.

You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father. . . (John 8:44)

Woe to you, blind guides . . . Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites. For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness (Matt. 23:16, 27)

Dr. Karl Menninger, a renowned psychiatrist and the head of the Menninger Clinic, wrote a book over ten years ago entitled *Whatever Became of Sin?* His thesis was that the reason so many people are confused and lost is because people no longer think of themselves as sinners. He concluded that if we really want to help people, then we should "tell it like it is," we should point out their sin to them so they can turn from it and be healed.

Some clergymen prefer pastoral counseling of individuals to the pulpit function. But the latter is a greater opportunity to both heal and prevent. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure, indeed, and there is much prevention to be done for large numbers of people who hunger and thirst after direction toward righteousness. Clergymen have a golden opportunity to prevent some of the accumulated misapprehensions, guilt, aggressive action, and other roots of later mental suffering and mental disease.

How? Preach! Tell it like it is. Say it from the pulpit. Cry it from the housetops.<sup>73</sup>

Man's greatest need is not to have his self-esteem built up or to have his "lost glory" restored. His greatest need is to have his sins forgiven and thus be reconciled to God! The joy of forgiveness and of restored fellowship with our Creator is the greatest joy man can experience. The person whose sins have been forgiven can then sing out with King David:

Happy is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is pardoned. Happy is the man unto whom the Lord counteth not iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no guile (Ps. 32:1-2).

To avoid mentioning sin is to preach a distorted gospel. R.C. Sproul eloquently summarizes this as follows:

The preacher who smiles benignly from his pulpit, assuring us that "God accepts you just the way you are" tells a monstrous lie. He sugarcoats the gospel of love with saccharine grace. God does not accept the arrogant; He turns His back to the impenitent. He maintains love toward His fallen creatures, inviting them back to restored fellowship, but strings are securely attached as we must come on bended knee.<sup>74</sup>

## Man and Glory

Many times throughout his writings Dr. Schuller asserts that we are all children of God. Is that what the Bible teaches? No, the Bible teaches that we are God's creation, it does not state that we are His children

by nature. Because we have rebelled willingly against God, we are “by nature children of wrath” (Eph. 2:3). Only by asking Jesus into our lives do we become adopted children of God: “But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name” (John 1:12; also cf. Rom. 8:15, 23; Gal. 4:5).

There are some Scriptures referring to the glory believers will possess (e.g., Col. 3:4; Rom. 9:23; John 17:22). However, any “glory” ascribed to believers is glory derived from Jesus Christ and is a reflection of the divine glory.

Because of his misunderstanding of man’s nature and man’s greatest need, Dr. Schuller has developed a doctrine that teaches the glorification of the human being.

Christianity with its doctrine of salvation is a faith designed by God for the glory of the human being for the greater glory of God.<sup>75</sup> Because of this we can pray, “O God, I am great.”<sup>76</sup>

It is no coincidence that Dr. Schuller rarely cites Scripture passages to buttress his teachings. The reason is twofold: he does not believe in the total authority of the Bible, and (as this article demonstrates) the Bible often contradicts what he teaches! What do the Scriptures tell us about glory? Is it something we deserve because “we were created to be princes and princesses?”<sup>77</sup> Or is it something that only God deserves? The Bible is explicit on this.

For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. *To Him be the glory forever.* Amen (Rom. 11:36).

*Glory to God* in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased (Luke 2:14).

I am the Lord, that is My name; I will not give My glory to another (Isa. 42:8).

What can we boast of, then? What can we glory in? The Bible tells us to “glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh” (Phil. 3:3). Elsewhere the Bible states “But he who boasts, let him boast in the Lord” (2 Cor. 10:17; also cf. Gal. 6:14; Acts 12:23; Jer. 9:23-24).

It is at this point that Dr. Schuller crosses the line from harmful teaching to blasphemy. He states: “And we can pray, ‘Our Father in heaven, honorable is our name.’”<sup>78</sup> He has gone to the extreme. He has attempted to lift man up to the level of God!

The highest pinnacle of pride and deception is to attempt to deify oneself. This is what Lucifer did; he said “I will make myself like the Most High” (Isa. 14:14). We cannot place ourselves on the same level as the Creator of the universe. We can never place our name on the same level as God’s name!

This is not the only time Dr. Schuller has done this. At other times he has attempted to lower God to man’s level. He writes: “God’s need for glory compels him to redeem his children from shame to glory.”<sup>79</sup>

God does not “need” glory; as the Creator of the universe He already possesses all glory! And God is not “compelled” to do anything. Whatever He does it is because He has chosen to do it, not because He is compelled to do it. As the God-man, Jesus Christ is intrinsically worthy of all honor and glory (Rev. 5:12). However, on the Phil Donahue show Dr. Schuller attempted to portray Jesus as being an egotist.

But the cross sanctifies the ego trip. That’s very significant. In other words, Jesus had an ego. He said, “I, if I be lifted up, will draw all men unto me.” Wow, what an ego trip He was on.<sup>80</sup>

This type of teaching is indefensible blasphemy. Jesus “humbled Himself” by His Incarnation (Phil. 2:8). We are told that “though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich” (2 Cor. 8:9). To talk of Jesus, the eternal God made flesh, as being on an ego trip is heresy!

### **Is Man Worthy?**

Dr. Schuller teaches that nonbelievers do not respond to God because they do not feel worthy of Him. His goal is to tell people that they are worthy of God: “The most serious sin is the one that causes me to say, ‘I am unworthy. I may have no claim to divine sonship if you examine me at my worst.’”<sup>81</sup>

The truth of the matter is that even at our very best we are still unworthy of God. Jesus said: “So you too, when you do all the things which are commanded you, say, ‘We are *unworthy* slaves; we have done only that which we ought to have done’” (Luke 17:10).

A story from Jesus' life also illustrates this. A Roman centurion came to Jesus and asked Him to heal his servant. Jesus agreed to go with him and heal his servant, but the centurion replied: "*Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed*" (Matt. 8:8).

What was Jesus' reaction? Did He say "Don't you know it's a sin to feel unworthy? Why of course you're worthy of Me, after all you were born to be a prince! Don't have such low self-esteem." No. Jesus replied, "I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith" (Matt. 8:10).

God accepts us only because of one thing: what Jesus did on the cross of Calvary (Rom. 5:9; 1 John 1:7). He does not accept us because of our self-worth, or because of any works that we do (Eph. 2:8-9; Isa. 64:6).

### The Gospel

In proclaiming the Gospel, Dr. Schuller believes you must never put another person down. "In fact, you are not preaching the Gospel unless you make people happy, because the Gospel is good news."<sup>82</sup>

The mistake Dr. Schuller makes is assuming that everyone who hears the Gospel has an open and receptive heart. If they do, then they will likely respond to it happily. But many people have no desire at all to change their lives.

What was the reaction when Peter and John preached the Gospel before the Sanhedrin? The Jewish leaders were "cut to the heart" (Acts 5:33). How did the Jewish leaders respond when Stephen proclaimed the Gospel? Likewise, they were "cut to the heart" and began "gnashing their teeth at him" (Acts 7:54). When Paul preached the Gospel in Jerusalem, a riot broke out (Acts 22).

These responses were not because Peter and John and Stephen and Paul were preaching "possibility thinking." The people were not "cut to the heart" because they were told that they were children of God and deserved to have their lost glory restored. Why were all of these people offended? Because of the "offense of the cross" (Gal. 5:11).

The Apostle Paul proclaimed: "For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2). To the Jews this was "a stumbling block." To the Gentiles it was "foolishness" (1 Cor. 1:23), and to Dr. Schuller it would be insulting (if he is consistent with his own teachings) because it reminds people of their sins!

There are many times when we have to point out something negative to people before we can help them. Alcoholics Anonymous has had tremendous success in helping alcoholics quit drinking because they have used a biblical principle: before they can help an individual quit drinking, he must first admit that he has a problem. Only after he admits that he is an alcoholic can he be helped.

It is much the same with the Gospel: there are many negative aspects to it. First of all, you are a sinner. Second, there is nothing that you can do to help yourself. And finally, if you are not helped, you are going to hell. If these things are not pointed out to the nonbeliever, then the Gospel has not been presented.

But someone might ask, "What about the testimonies of people who have been converted through Dr. Schuller's ministry?" It is true that there are testimonies of people who have come to the Lord by reading his books or hearing him on television. But it is also true that there are many nonChristians who have felt better about themselves after listening to Dr. Schuller, but were totally unaware of the fact that they are lost sinners who are destined for hell unless they accept Jesus Christ! Michael Nason, in his biography on Dr. Schuller, records several such "testimonies":

Although I am of the Jewish faith, you have helped me to realize that through God and love all things are possible.<sup>83</sup>

"We're Jewish," the gentleman said. "In fact, our son is a rabbi, but we love to watch you, Dr. Schuller . . ."<sup>84</sup>

The terrible tragedy is that there are untold thousands of nonbelievers who think they know what Christianity is all about because they watch the "Hour of Power" or have read one or more of Dr. Schuller's books, yet who have never heard the true Gospel.

## Salvation

As we have seen, Dr. Schuller believes that salvation is being rescued “from shame to glory.”<sup>85</sup> For him being “born again” means to “be changed from a negative to a positive self-image— from inferiority to self-esteem, from fear to love, from doubt to trust.”<sup>86</sup> Dr. Schuller’s problem is that he has (as he often does) confused an effect with its cause. Salvation, or being “born again,” gives us a basis for a high self-esteem and to have a greater love and trust. However, salvation is not a synonym for self-esteem. According to the Bible the new birth is a spiritual phenomenon, not a psychological one (John 3:5; 1 Pet. 1:3-5).

What is the “real fruit” of salvation? It is not a restoration of our pride and glory. Rather, it is a restoration of our fellowship with God. It means that we now have a living relationship with our Maker and have been saved from the punishment that we justly deserved.

## A PARABLE

A modern-day, adapted version of Jesus’ parable of the Pharisee and the Publican (Luke 18:10-14) will aptly conclude our study of Robert Schuller’s “New Reformation.”

Two men went up into the church to pray, one a possibility thinker, the other a negative thinker. The possibility thinker stood and was praying thus to himself, “God, I thank Thee that I am not like other people: people with low self-esteem, people who think they are unworthy of You, or even like this negative thinker. I think only positive thoughts for I was created to be a prince, I am worthy of glory, honorable is our name!”

But the negative thinker, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, “God, be merciful to me, the sinner.” I tell you, the negative thinker went down to his house justified rather than the other, for everyone who exalts himself shall be humbled but he who humbles himself shall be exalted.

## NOTES

1. Robert H. Schuller, *Move Ahead With Possibility Thinking* (Old Tappan, NJ: Spire Books, 1967), p. 20.
2. Robert H. Schuller, *Self-Esteem: The New Reformation* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1982), p. 12.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Bella Stumbo, “Schuller: The Gospel of Success” *Los Angeles Times*, 29 May 1983, part 1, p. 24.
5. Robert H. Schuller, *You Can Become the Person You Want to Be* (New York: Pillar Books, 1973), p. 65.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 39.
7. Robert H. Schuller, *It’s Possible* (New York: Fawcett Gold Medal, 1978), p. 28.
8. Schuller, *Move Ahead With Possibility Thinking*, p. 189.
9. Stumbo, “Schuller: The Gospel of Success,” *loc. cit.*
10. Michael Nason and Donna Nason, *Robert Schuller: The Inside Story* (Waco: Word Books, 1983), p. 152.
11. Robert H. Schuller, entry for May 29, *Daily Power Thoughts* (Irvine, CA: Harvest House Publishers, n.d.).
12. Schuller, *Move Ahead With Possibility Thinking*, p. 112.
13. Schuller, *It’s Possible*, p. 29.
14. Schuller, *Self-Esteem: The New Reformation*, p. 19.
15. Robert H. Schuller, *Self-Love: The Dynamic Force of Success* (New York: Hawthorn Books, Inc., 1969), p. 21.
16. Schuller, *Self-Esteem: The New Reformation*, p. 57.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 64.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 39.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 45.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 136.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
23. *Ibid.*, pp. 63, 64.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 67.
25. *Ibid.*, pp. 66, 67.
26. Robert Schuller, as quoted in Joel A. MacCollam, “Self-Love: How Far? How Biblical? How Healthy?” Discussion with Robert Schuller, Elizabeth Skoglund, and Lewis Smedes. *Eternity*, Vol. 30, Issue 2, February 1979, p. 23. Also cf. Schuller, *Self-Esteem: The New Reformation*, p. 127.
27. Schuller, *Move Ahead With Possibility Thinking*, p. 209.
28. Schuller, *Self-Love: The Dynamic Force of Success*, pp. 87, 88.

29. Schuller, entry for March 23, *Daily Power Thoughts*.
30. Schuller, *Self-Esteem: The New Reformation*, p. 54.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 52.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 39.
33. *Ibid.*, pp. 26, 27.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 140.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 69.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 98.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 52.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 80.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 127.
41. Robert H. Schuller, *Your Future is Your Friend*, (New Canaan, NJ: Keats Publishing, Inc., 1964), p. 18.
42. Schuller, *Self-Esteem: The New Reformation*, p. 99.
43. *Ibid.*, p. 151.
44. *Ibid.*, p. 68.
45. *Ibid.*, p. 161.
46. Nason and Nason, *Robert Schuller: The Inside Story*, p. 59.
47. Schuller, *Self-Esteem: The New Reformation*, p. 17.
48. Nason and Nason, *Robert Schuller: The Inside Story*, p. 171.
49. Stumbo, "Schuller: The Gospel of Success," *loc. cit.*
50. Schuller, entry for May 29, *Daily Power Thoughts*.
51. *The Holy Scriptures According to the Masoretic Text* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1955), p. 987.
52. Laird Harris, Gleason L Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Workbook of the Old Testament*, Vol. I (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), p. 417.
53. Schuller, *Self-Esteem: The New Reformation*, p. 80.
54. *Ibid.*, p. 82.
55. *Ibid.*, p. 80.
56. Schuller, *It's Possible*, *loc. cit.*
57. Jon Trott and William Kirk Kilpatrick, "The Psychological Connection," *Cornerstone*, Vol. 12, Issue 68, p. 18.
58. Roberts Rugh and Landrum B. Shettles, *From Conception to Birth: The Drama of Life's Beginnings* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 18.
59. Schuller, *Self-Esteem: The New Reformation*, p. 19.
60. *Ibid.*, pp. 15, 16.
61. Lewis Smedes, as quoted in Joel A. MacCollam, "Self-Love: How Far? How Biblical? How Healthy?," *loc. cit.*
62. Trott and Kilpatrick, "The Psychological Connection," *loc. cit.*
63. David G. Myers "The Inflated Self," *The Christian Century*, 1 December 1982, p. 1226.
64. Robert Schuller, in Joel A. MacCollam, "Self-Love: How Far? How Biblical? How Healthy?" p. 24.
65. C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1943), p. 190.
66. Schuller, *Self-Esteem: The New Reformation*, p. 57.
67. *Ibid.*, p. 39.
68. *Ibid.*, p. 46.
69. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
70. R.C. Sproul, *In Search of Dignity* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1983), p. 95.
71. Schuller, *Self-Esteem The New Reformation*, p. 67.
72. *Ibid.*, p. 72.
73. Karl Menninger, *Whatever Became Of Sin?* (New York: Hawthorn Books, Inc., 1973), p. 228.
74. Sproul, *In Search of Dignity*, pp. 56, 57.
75. Schuller, *Self-Esteem: The New Reformation*, p. 80.
76. Schuller, entry for January 24, *Daily Power Thoughts*.
77. Schuller, *Self-Esteem: The New Reformation*, p. 52.
78. *Ibid.*, p. 69.
79. *Ibid.*, p. 140.
80. Schuller, "Donahue," 12 August 1980, Transcript #08120, p. 10.
81. Schuller, *Self-Esteem: The New Reformation*, p. 98.
82. Schuller, *Your Future is Your Friend*, *loc. cit.*
83. Nason and Nason, *Robert Schuller: The Inside Story*, p. 147.
84. *Ibid.*, p. 187.
85. Schuller, *Self-Esteem: The New Reformation*, p. 151.
86. *Ibid.*, p. 68.