



A Different Gospel

An Evaluation of
the Teachings of
Robert Schuller

by Gil Rugh

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A Different Gospel: An Evaluation of the Teachings of Robert Schuller

Why a critique of the teachings of Robert Schuller? Recently at Indian Hills Community Church, we had been studying the book of 2 Peter including chapter two and its discussion on false prophets. After one message, I received a letter from a person who had concerns about some statements I had made. In particular, he was disturbed that I had mentioned Robert Schuller as one who was promoting serious doctrinal error. He explained that he believed Dr. Schuller was a genuine believer, who, though incorrect on some doctrinal matters, was within the boundaries of biblical Christianity. As a result, I decided to do an evaluation of the teachings of Dr. Schuller, the results of which have found their way into this booklet.

Finding out where Dr. Schuller stands theologically is not a difficult task. His ministry is widely known and his views are easily accessible. He is senior minister at the famed Crystal Cathedral in Garden Grove, California, and his television program, "The Hour of Power," is the most widely watched broadcast of all televised church services. Dr. Schuller's television programs and books reach millions around the world. Consequently, he is one of the most recognizable figures in Christianity. Also, Schuller has clearly put his theological convictions in writing where they can be analyzed. Throughout the years he has been consistent in holding to his views. He does not say one thing one day and something different another.

Some may wonder why such a critique is necessary at all and may see this as quibbling over theological jargon. Yet that is truly not the case. As we will see, the brand of Christianity Robert Schuller is promoting is a serious and dangerous departure from biblical Christianity. The Apostle Paul, in 1 Thessalonians 5:21 told us to, “examine everything carefully.” Part of our responsibility as believers is to exercise careful and diligent spiritual discernment. We are to examine everything and put it to the test. We are to scrutinize all teachings so we may know what is indeed genuine and what is counterfeit.

When Paul wrote his letter to the Galatians he was concerned they were believing false teaching. He asked them, “You were running well; who hindered you from obeying the truth? This persuasion did not come from Him who calls you. A little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough” (Galatians 5:7-9). Paul likened bad teaching to leaven that rapidly permeates bread. The analogy is clear—false doctrine spreads and corrupts. That is why we must deal with false doctrine and not take it lightly. That is why elders in the church are to be “holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching” (Titus 1:9). The reasons are twofold—that they “may be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict” (Titus 1:9). Holding fast the faithful word includes proclaiming the truth; but it also involves refuting those who contradict the truth. The Bible tells us that not only are we to proclaim the truth, we are to expose what is false.

Several years ago, I, and many other pastors nationwide, received a book as a gift from Robert Schuller and the Institute for Successful Church Leadership in Garden Grove, California. The book was entitled, *Self-Esteem: The New Reformation*. This book also came with a letter stating:

- You and I share a strong exciting interest in watching Christ’s church grow. It’s been my joy to share tested concepts and principles for church growth during the past twelve years through the Robert Schuller Institute for Successful Church Leadership.

Ever since I graduated from Western Theological Seminary 33 years ago, I have been developing a theology for mission which could equip the church with a style, strategy, substance

and spirit that would enable us to communicate the joy of Christ's eternal Gospel with a secular unchurched world.

After 32 years of thinking, praying, testing, retesting, finally I have published a book which I am delighted to share with those who share my joy in Christian church work in the world today.

And through the generosity of an anonymous friend, I'm able to send to you a complimentary copy. . . .

I hope you'll take time to read the book. And read it prayerfully! It's not a book to be read lightly or skimmed! Together we find the fresh message that can appeal to the secular world because we alone have the answer in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. . . .

I put this book forth humbly—but freely, gladly and most readily—that our churches might become the true Living Body of Jesus Christ in a suffering and stress-filled, sick and sinful world, today. We have a Savior, and He is beautiful.

This letter ended with "God bless you in your good work!" and was signed by Robert H. Schuller. When I read this letter there seemed to be much in it that was commendable and that would lead one to believe that Robert Schuller's book would be consistent with biblical Christianity. After all, he talks about a theology for missions that will help us communicate the Gospel of Jesus Christ to a secular, unchurched, sick and sinful world. He says he wants churches to become the "true Living Body of Jesus Christ." He talks about a Savior who is indeed "beautiful." However, as I examined the teachings of Robert Schuller in his book, I became convinced that his doctrines are not in line with the Bible.

I would like to make clear that I am not saying Robert Schuller originated the ideas set forth in his book or that he is the only one teaching these things. In fact, many of the principles Schuller promotes were popularized by his mentor, Norman Vincent Peale. Yet Schuller is a clear representative of the teachings he is advocating.

Schuller's impact on the church is significant. Many of the ideas set forth in Schuller's book have found their way into America's evangelical churches. In fact, much of the church's current

involvement with ecumenism and psychology can be traced to his teachings. Some churches have adopted his philosophy of ministry while others have picked up some of his teachings and given them a different twist. Not everything promoted by him has been adopted by all evangelical churches, of course, but little doubt exists as to the impact the doctrines of Robert Schuller have had on the church.

As we work through Schuller's book, it will become increasingly clear that he is promoting doctrines which are opposed to Scripture. Be forewarned that he will often use biblical terminology. He will use many terms familiar to orthodox Christianity. He will talk about being born-again, Jesus Christ, salvation, sin, reconciliation, and the kingdom of God. Yet he will give these terms new definitions that are not consistent with the Bible. One characteristic of false teachers is that they will speak our language and use our terminology, but they will subtly sneak in meanings that are false. This is consistent with what the Bible says about false teachers. Peter warned us that "there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies" (2 Peter 2:1). Notice that these false teachers come from "among you." In other words, they will rise up from the church. They will pretend to be one of us yet they will "introduce destructive heresies." Paul had these words for the Ephesian elders as he was about to leave them:

Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them (Acts 20:28-30).

Paul knew that as soon as he left, the false teachers would be busy trying to deceive the flock. Jesus also warned, "Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves" (Matthew 7:15). The Bible warns us that false teachers will arise from the ranks of the orthodox. They will associate with us and use our terminology but they will also weave in their destructive teachings.

Before looking specifically at the teachings of Robert Schuller, it is worth our time to notice the following comments made by

Martyn Lloyd-Jones concerning 2 Peter 2 and the issue of false teachers in the church. His comments were made in 1946-47, years before Robert Schuller's ministry began. In these comments, Lloyd-Jones noted the general characteristics of false teachers:

Surely the ultimate difference between the true prophet and the false one is this, that the true prophet preaches the message of the Bible, and the other preaches what he thinks the Bible ought to be saying and teaching. This is the first characteristic of the false prophet; he is not called, he has no real authority and sanction. . . .

The second characteristic of the false prophet is that he is always comforting. He never criticises never makes us feel uncomfortable. He always tries to say what we want him to say. . . . He never makes you feel you are a sinner, he never makes you feel you are lost, he never makes you hate yourself and the sin that is in you. He is always telling you in one way or other that you are wonderful, if only you were given decent circumstances" (D.M. Lloyd-Jones, *Banner of Truth*, 1983, pp. 130-31, Sermons preached Oct 1946-Mar 1947)

In contrast to the true spokesman for God, the false teacher does not tell the people what they need to hear—what God requires of them. Instead he tells them what makes them comfortable—what they want to hear. Lloyd-Jones also said:

Some of you may recall the advice that Martin Luther gave to his friend Philip Melanchthon when he was setting out on his career. "Always preach," said Luther, "in such a way that if the people listening do not come to hate their sin, they will instead hate you. (Ibid, p. 43)

As we begin this evaluation of Robert Schuller's book, *Self-Esteem: The New Reformation*, my goal is to make the reader aware of Schuller's positions on key doctrinal areas. When that is known, the reader will be better able to make an informed decision concerning the correctness of Dr. Schuller's teachings. Because of lack of time and space, I do not quote the entire book consecutively but I have chosen out certain sections that have important theological implications. Each quote is followed by the appropriate page number. I have done my best to quote this book in context so as not to misrepresent Robert Schuller in any way.

Man-Centered Theology

At the heart of most false teaching is a man-centered theology as opposed to a God-centered approach. A man-centered approach does not focus on God's glory, God's character, God's will, and God's Word. Instead, it focuses on glorifying man. Paul, when describing the characteristics of unsaved men says they "exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator" (Romans 1:25). It is man's nature to glorify the creature [man] but not the Creator [God]. A man-centered theology at its roots rejects the living God. As we look at Schuller's teachings, it will become clear that the driving force in his theology is that man must be exalted. In a subtle way, he will tell us that God is not glorified until we glorify man. In fact on page 167 he says, "it is impossible to glorify God until we glorify his children."

In the introduction to his book, Schuller quotes a letter from a man who was an associate professor at the University of Pennsylvania. This man had read Schuller's book and made the following comments:

- I have been reviewing with great interest your new book, *Self Esteem: The New Reformation*. . . . It is surprising how our minds have come to a similar position—you have pursued a religious route and I have pursued a scientific path, and we have both arrived at the same bottom line: unconditional self-esteem. (p. 11)

Schuller also records the comments of another reviewer, Dr. Martin Marty, who had this to say about Schuller's book:

- "Is not this a philosophy which makes room for God more than a theology that incorporates psychology?" To which I replied, "Perhaps, I wouldn't be surprised. (pp. 11-12)

Both these comments are reason for concern. Right away we see that there is nothing particularly biblical or theological about Schuller's findings. According to Dr. Marty, Schuller's ideas are more of a philosophy of life with God added on than a theology taken from the Bible. To this Schuller agreed.

- My ministry has, for over thirty years, been a mission to un-

believers. If I were a church man talking to church leaders, I would agree that the theocentric approach is the right approach. However, I have seen my calling as one that communicates spiritual reality to the unchurched who may not be ready to believe in God. I have been trying to carry on a dialogue with persons who are not at all prepared to listen to 'someone with God-talk.' (p. 12)

Schuller says his primary mission is to reach unbelievers. Yet he does not want to reach them with "God talk." To him, a God-centered approach is not the correct way to reach the unbeliever. In other words, to reach the unbeliever we have to put aside a God-centered approach and use one that will appeal to the unbeliever. This same basic philosophy is what drives the current seeker-service mentality in the church today. Increasingly, church services today are geared primarily to the unbeliever. The focus is on what they want and expect from a church service. This often means avoiding biblical terms and doctrines, and certainly anything that might offend the unbeliever. The supposed needs of people become the priority of the church instead of standing for the truth and glorifying God. Today's seeker-service mentality is one instance in which the ideas of Schuller have been grafted into the evangelical church.

Concerning Schuller's stated mission, one additional point must be made. Although Schuller leads the reader to believe that his purpose is to make the Gospel easier for the unbeliever to understand by avoiding "God-talk," he will then proceed to go way beyond that to actually redefining the historic, foundational doctrines of the church. So, as we will see, instead of making the Gospel and doctrine easier for the unbeliever to understand, he alters the true meaning of important doctrines.

- It is precisely at this point that I feel the church must be reformed. For the church to address the unchurched with a theocentric attitude is to invite failure in mission. (p. 12)

Schuller is saying that to approach unbelievers with a God-centered attitude is to "invite failure." In other words, God cannot be central in the church's ministry to the unsaved. Yet if the church does not start with God, what makes the church the church? He goes on to say:

- For decades now we have watched the church in Western Europe and in America decline in power, membership, and influence. I believe that this decline is the result of our placing theocentric communications above the meeting of the deeper emotional and spiritual needs of humanity. (p. 12)
- This means that the most important question facing the church is: “What are the deepest needs felt by human beings?” (p. 13)

The Bible tells us that the church is to be “the pillar and support of the truth” (1 Timothy 3:15). Yet, according to Schuller, meeting emotional and spiritual needs is the most important issue facing the church. These comments by Schuller clearly show that he is trying to steer churches away from a God-centered emphasis to a man-centered one.

Do We Mean the Same Thing?

Identifying false teachers is difficult because they use the same terminology believers do, but they give different meanings. The cults have been successful in doing this for years. They often refer to Jesus, salvation, and reconciliation but they give different meanings to these terms. In doing so, they corrupt the truth. In a similar way, Robert Schuller uses terminology that seems orthodox. The meanings he gives to the terms, however, are clearly different from what the Bible means. For example, notice what Schuller says concerning sin, death and hell:

- I am convinced that the deepest of all human needs is salvation from sin and hell. I see sin as all-pervasive in humanity, infecting all human behavior and polluting the social institutions and systems at every level. The result of sin is death and hell. (p. 14)

This quote appears to be very sound. I agree that man’s greatest need is salvation from sin and hell, and that death and hell are the results of sin. I also agree that sin is “all-pervasive” and infects humanity at every level. If someone reads this quote without reading other portions of Schuller’s book, they might come to the conclusion that Schuller’s teachings are in line with biblical Christianity.

But notice how Schuller redefines the terms he has mentioned:

- 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.*" (p. 14) [emphasis mine]

According to Schuller, sin is not defined in relationship to God. Sin is not rebellion against God. To him, sin is anything that robs a person of his or her self-esteem. He has radically altered the biblical meaning of sin and given it his own definition. He also redefines what hell is:

- And what is hell? It is the loss of pride that naturally follows separation from God—the ultimate and unfailing source of our soul's sense of self-respect. . . . A person is in hell when he has lost his self-esteem. (pp. 14-15)

The Bible teaches that hell is a literal place of torment (see Mark 9:47-48); but to Schuller, a person is in hell when they have lost their pride and self-esteem. This is a major alteration of a biblical doctrine.

Schuller has this to say about original sin:

- What is our hope? It is reconciliation. How can this happen? It will happen, I am convinced, when we redefine our doctrine of sin. Classical theology defines sin as "rebellion against God." The answer is not incorrect as much as it is shallow and insulting to the human being. . . . The core of "original sin," that state in which we are all born, is lack of trust. . . . Lack of trust is another way of saying that we are all born with a negative self-image, an inferiority complex, if you please. (p. 65)

- 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. The core of original sin is LOT—Lack of Trust. Or, it could be considered an innate inability to adequately value ourselves. Label it a “negative self-image,” but 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. (p. 67)

To Schuller, original sin is not “rebellion against God.” Even though the Bible tells us that “sin is lawlessness” (1 John 3:4), to him this is “shallow and insulting to the human being.” Schuller defines original sin as “lack of trust” and a “negative self-image.” But does the Bible identify man’s unredeemed nature as lack of trust or negative self-image?

What about being born-again? The Bible teaches that being born-again is a spiritual birth in which man is saved from sin, death, and hell and made a child of God. But to Schuller:

- 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.

He links being born again with changing from a negative to a positive self-image. Could that possibly be what Jesus meant when he told Nicodemus, “you must be born again?”

Schuller also redefines what salvation is:

- As we focus on Jesus Christ, we shall discover a new theology, one that offers salvation from shame to self-esteem. (p. 39)

No longer is salvation linked to deliverance from sin and death—it is now from shame to self-esteem. He continues:

- We must proclaim the Good News! God wants us to reclaim and redeem lost humanity. We must tell people everywhere that God wants all of us to feel good about ourselves! (p. 58)

The first part of this quote sounds correct. We must proclaim the

Good News that God wants to reclaim and redeem lost humanity. But what does this mean to Schuller? “We must tell people everywhere that God wants all of us to feel good about ourselves.” Yet is that the Gospel? The Bible tells us, “But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). The good news the Bible presents is that Christ has paid the penalty for our sins and that by believing in Him by faith alone we can have eternal life. But is that the good news of Robert Schuller? To him the good news is feeling good about ourselves.

What about the kingdom of God?

- What is the kingdom of God on earth? It is a community of persons who, through an experience of nonjudgmental acceptance and affirmation by Jesus Christ, have been personally redeemed from self-shame to self-esteem. (p. 72)

To Schuller, God is trying to build his kingdom by appealing to our unsatisfied hunger for self-esteem. The Bible presents the Kingdom of God as Jesus Christ’s coming righteous rule over this earth; but Schuller has twisted it to mean salvation from self-shame to self-esteem.

As we have seen, Schuller’s uses of terms like “sin,” “hell,” “born again,” and “kingdom of God” show us how careful we must be in evaluating his teachings. Though he uses terms we are familiar with, he means something totally different. If we are not careful to examine exactly what he is saying, it is easy for us to accept what he is saying as true. It is not difficult to understand how people, who are just generally aware of the teachings of Robert Schuller, might have a hard time grasping that he is promoting false doctrine because much of what he says sounds correct. But as we have seen, he redefines and twists the terms to mean what he wants them to mean. He is not a teacher who does not know Christian theology. He is a teacher who has rejected true Christian theology.

Self-Esteem--The Greatest Need Facing Man?

As the title of his book indicates, Schuller sees the church in great need for a new reformation—a reformation of self-esteem:

- What the Church needs, more than anything else, is a new reformation--nothing less will do! Without a new theological reformation, the Christian church as the authentic body of Christ may not survive. (p. 25)

He then goes on to say that the church needs a “redefinition and reformation of theology.” (p. 26) What does this include?

- What we need is a theology of salvation that begins and ends with a recognition of every person’s hunger for glory. (p. 27)

Notice the man-centered emphasis in this statement. To Schuller, our theology of salvation should not begin with the recognition of the sinfulness of man and the necessity of the shed blood of Jesus Christ for forgiveness of sins. Rather, the starting point should be “every person’s hunger for glory.” Yet, did not the Lord say, “I am the Lord, that is My name; I will not give My glory to another” (Isaiah 42:8)?

The church, in recent years, has joined the world in embracing the self-esteem movement. For many centuries the church understood that man’s problem was not lack of self-love or esteem but pride. God’s Word tells us that men by nature are “lovers of self. . . boastful, arrogant” (2 Timothy 3:2), and that “no one ever hated his own flesh” (Ephesians 5:29). But Schuller has certainly been a pioneer in helping bring the idea of self-esteem into the church. As he says:

- Self-esteem then, or “pride in being a human being,” is the single greatest need facing the human race today. (p. 19)

But is self-esteem the greatest need facing humanity? Doesn’t the Bible teach that man’s greatest need is to be reconciled to his Creator and delivered from the power of sin and hell? Not according to Schuller. For him the greatest need facing all humanity is self-esteem.

Self-esteem is so essential to Schuller that he links it to salvation:

- When a human being’s self-esteem is stimulated and sustained (like a branch in the trunk of a tree) in a redemptive relationship with Christ, we are truly saved from sin and hell. (p. 20)

Notice the mixture in this quote. He talks about a redemptive relationship with Christ and being saved from sin and hell. Yet he links these terms with self-esteem being stimulated and sustained. He wants to link redemption in Christ with self-esteem. Where does one find that in the Bible?

Where do mankind's problems come from? Schuller holds that the core problem of mankind is lack of self-esteem:

- If we have a problem in our life today, if something is missing emotionally, if there is something lacking deep in our soul, let us begin by asking ourselves the most basic question: "Do I have a positive sense of self-respect or self-esteem?" (p. 59)
- I truly believe that further research will indicate that all "sinful," "evil," and antisocial" behavior results from a deep emotional need—an ego need that we can define as a hunger for self-worth. (p. 138)
- There are many studies today which document the scientific fact that a lack of self-esteem is at the root of alcoholism, drug addiction, teenage rebellion, marriage and family breakup, and all sorts and varieties of crime. (p. 60)

All these problems the Bible calls sin are now, according to Schuller, the result of lacking self-esteem. Yet Galatians 5:19-21 says, "Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. . . ." Mark 7:21-22 says, "For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness." The Bible says that evil deeds come from evil hearts—not from a lack of self-esteem.

- One reason many Christians have behaved so badly in the past two thousand years is because we have been taught from

infancy to adulthood “how sinful” and “how worthless” we are. . . . When we have a tremendous sense of self-respect, we don’t stoop to crime. It’s beneath our dignity. (p. 61)

To Schuller, today’s problems are because the church for two thousand years has made people aware of their sin. To him, the preaching of sin is the real cause of crime.

- What is the basic problem in our world today? Many human beings don’t realize who they are. . . . But if we perceive ourselves as children of God, then he is our Father. (p. 62)

Is it true that the basic problem in the world is that people do not perceive themselves as children of God? The Bible says many who sees themselves as children of God in actuality are not. Jesus said, “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 7:21). 1 John 2:4 states, “The one who says, ‘I have come to know Him,’ and does not keep His commandments is a liar and the truth is not in him.” True salvation is based on more than just perceiving ourselves as God’s children. But Schuller fails to mention this.

- Classical Reformed Theology declares that we are conceived and born rebellious sinners. But that answer is too shallow. (p. 63)

David said, though, “Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, And in sin my mother conceived me” (Psalm 51:5). Ephesians 2:4 tells us that we are “by nature children of wrath.” But to Schuller this is a shallow answer.

- What is desperately needed is a clear and Christ-like understanding of such classical concepts as 1) sin, 2) salvation, and 3) repentance. (p. 97)

This sounds good, but how does Schuller understand these terms? Let’s start with sin:

- Reformation theology failed to make clear that the core of sin is a lack of self-esteem. (p. 98)
- The most serious sin is the one that causes me to say, “I am unworthy.” (p. 98)

These statements show how far he is from the truth. To Schuller, seeing oneself as an unworthy sinner is now the greatest sin. If this is right, the prophet Isaiah must have been in grave sin when he declared:

“Woe is me, for I am ruined!
Because I am a man of unclean lips,
And I live among a people of unclean lips;
For my eyes have seen the King,
the Lord of Hosts” (Isaiah 6:5).

Peter must also have been in sin when he said to Jesus, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!” (Luke 5:8).

- For once a person believes he is an “unworthy sinner,” it is doubtful if he can really honestly accept the saving grace God offers in Jesus Christ. (p. 98)

Again, notice how the truth is twisted. To him, the one who sees himself as an unworthy sinner is the one who is unsavable and it is doubtful whether that person can honestly accept the saving grace of God. But isn't it precisely the recognition of sin that is essential to salvation? In the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax-gatherer in Luke 18, we see the opposite of what Schuller says. While the Pharisee praised himself for being righteous:

the tax-gatherer, 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, this man 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 (Luke 18:13-14).

The tax-gatherer recognized his sinfulness, begged God for mercy and in doing so, found salvation. Realizing our unworthiness before God is an essential element in coming to salvation. But to Schuller this is the greatest sin. Again, Schuller turns truth on its head.

Ecumenism

Schuller's new reformation also includes a willingness to put aside doctrinal differences for the sake of unity:

- How do we explain, justify, and tolerate the destructive disunity and suspicions between the various sectors in Christianity?

Divisive, suspicious tensions continue to disrupt what should be a beautiful unity of love among the followers of Christ. “Labeling” remains dangerously fashionable. Labels such as, “evangelical,” “fundamental,” “charismatic,” “liberal” contribute to polarization and produce a climate of implied or spoken distrust. Respectful dialogue becomes virtually impossible. What we desperately need to offset this disunity and distrust is a new and cleansing theology of communication. (p. 27)

Schuller says we need to get rid of any labels that may identify one’s doctrines and beliefs. Whether one is conservative, liberal, or anything else, that should not stop us from unity, even if serious disagreement exists on what makes a person a Christian. This type of thinking is the driving force behind a number of movements like Promise Keepers and the Roman Catholic—Evangelical accord. Both Promise Keepers and the signers of the Roman Catholic—Evangelical accord emphasize unity even at the expense of critical doctrinal issues. The overwhelming tide in the church today is to sweep aside doctrinal issues because they are divisive and stand in the way of unity.

Using Secular Psychology

The evangelical church for many years understood that the Bible alone is the all-sufficient source for all matters “pertaining to life and godliness” (2 Peter 1:3). It has acknowledged that “All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16-17). The Bible is “perfect, restoring the soul” (Psalm 19:7). When it comes to spiritual matters and the living out of our Christian lives, the Bible alone has the answers. Yet in recent years, many in the evangelical church have added another authority—the findings of secular psychology. Concerning this, Schuller says:

- Are we aware that theology has failed to accommodate and

apply proven insights in human behavior as revealed by twentieth century psychologists?

A widespread tension has too long existed between psychologists and theologians. Both disciplines should be committed to the healing of the human spirit. Both can and must learn from each other. Neither one can claim to have “the whole truth.” . . . What we need is a theological restructuring which synergizes scientific and spiritual truth as related to the human being. (p. 27)

This statement tells us much about Schuller's view of Scripture. To Schuller, obviously, the Bible is not “perfect, restoring the soul” (Psalm 19:7) for we need the findings of modern psychology to come alongside to help where the Bible is not adequate. Since the Bible, according to him, does not have “the whole truth” it must be wedded with secular psychology. Yet Jesus said, “Sanctify them in the truth; Thy word is truth” (John 17:17). According to Jesus, God's Word is totally sufficient to guide and sanctify the believer.

Heaven and Hell a Turnoff?

In his book, Schuller says the church needs to move away from its traditional teachings on heaven and hell:

- Many sincere students within the larger body of believers are turned off by a theology that offers nothing more than a classical heaven and hell proposition. The alternative theology of mission focuses on peace, brotherhood, and economic equality. (p. 30)

The church, according to this quote, is supposed to alter its theology of heaven and hell and replace it with peace, brotherhood, and economic equality.

- Oddly enough, in twenty centuries, the church has moved forward without understanding or acknowledging this question: *What is the deepest need of human beings?* The church has survived through these centuries by assuming that every person's ultimate need was “salvation from sin.” It has held out “hope for forgiveness” as the ultimate answer. What's wrong with this interpretation today? Nothing and yet, ev-

everything, if in the process of interpreting sin and repentance the gospel is presented in substance or spirit in a way that assaults a person's self-esteem. (p. 31)

In other words, the church should not preach about salvation from sin and the hope for forgiveness if that in any way assaults a person's self-esteem. But how can we tell a person they are a sinner who needs to die to self and follow Christ without assaulting his or her self-esteem? That is exactly Schuller's point. He wants us to quit preaching the message of repentance from sin.

- The need for dignity, self-worth, self-respect, and self-esteem is the deepest of all human needs. If our need for dignity is assaulted or ignored by the church, then truly we are "lost sinners." (p. 34)

Notice all the "self" words in this quote—"self-worth," "self-respect," "self-esteem." This tells us where Schuller believes the focus should be—on self. And what is a lost sinner to him? It is one whose dignity is assaulted or ignored by the church. Again, notice that Schuller uses terms that we are familiar with and gives them a different twist. Schuller believes there are lost sinners. By this, however, he does not mean vile, sinful people who are lost and on their way to an eternal hell; they are those who have suffered a loss of dignity.

- What is really the driving force behind the hedonism and the immorality in the human race? It is precisely every person's need for self-respect. (p. 34)

Yet the Bible says the driving force behind hedonism is a sinful love of self (2 Tim. 3:2), not a person's need for self-respect.

- All of the problems facing the church will find healing answers if we start with and do not get distracted at any time from meeting every person's deepest need—his hunger for self-esteem, self-worth, and personal dignity. This means that human dignity becomes the ultimate value. (p. 35)

He says all of the problems the church faces can be healed if the church will only focus on meeting the people's needs for esteem, worth and dignity. This statement again shows the emphasis on man and his worth and dignity. Lost in all this is the worship of God, a

desire to exalt Him, a longing to bring our lives into conformity with His will. The focus has become man.

Is Starting with God the Problem?

Amazingly, starting with the Bible and God is part of the reason the church is in the mess it is in today, according to Schuller:

- Historical theology has dictated and directed that the starting point for many theologians and Christian leaders will be the Scriptures. That sounds sensational. Who would challenge that? Yet history shows that, as a starting point, disagreement over interpretations of Scripture lead to divisiveness. (p. 36)

If Schuller is correct, then we cannot use the Scriptures as our starting point because the Scriptures cause divisions. Our base, therefore, has to be something other than the Bible. Again, this type of thinking has swept the church today. Broad movements like Promise Keepers openly claim to reach beyond “denominational barriers” to promote unity. With this, crucial biblical doctrines must be avoided because they would bring division. And division is now something that must be avoided at all costs.

- Other classical systematic theologians would begin with the doctrine of God. But this is part of the reason the church is in the predicament it is in today. (p. 36)

So, not only are we not to use the Scriptures as a starting point, we should not use God as a starting point either. According to Schuller, starting with God “is part of the reason the church is in the predicament it is in today.” How could a true born-again believer claim that starting with God is part of the problem?

- We can never communicate until we establish a fresh starting point that transcends historical theological differences. (p. 36)

What is this fresh starting point?

- The “Dignity of the Person” will then be the new theological bench mark! (p. 37)

We cannot start with the Scriptures or God; but the “dignity of the person” is now the new starting point. Or in other words, the place to start is with man not God or the Bible.

- Where the sixteenth-century Reformation returned our focus to sacred Scriptures as the only infallible rule for faith and practice, the new reformation will return our focus to the sacred right of every person to self-esteem! The fact is, the church will never succeed until it satisfies the human being’s hunger for self-value. (p. 38)

If he is correct, the church needs to get its mind off the Scriptures and put it on the sacred right of every person to self-esteem. Therefore, we need to get away from the Bible and God as our starting points and focus on individual dignity.

Pitting Jesus Against the Bible

Another characteristic of false teachers is that they will try to set Jesus Christ against the Bible. Put another way, when they come across portions of Scripture that contradict what they are promoting, they will claim that the “spirit of Jesus” overrides the text they do not agree with. And Schuller does this. For example, to Schuller, Martin Luther and John Calvin were influenced too much by Paul and not enough by Jesus—as if the two had different theologies:

- 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? (p. 39)

Schuller wants to move away from what Paul had to say and focus on what Jesus says:

- 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. . . . So, Christ must be accepted as Lord over the Scriptures. The Bible must not compete with the Lord for the seat of glory. (p. 45)

With this statement Jesus is pitted against the rest of Scripture. Yet nowhere in the Bible does it indicate that Jesus, the "Eternal Word transcends the written Word." Jesus never made such a distinction. The Spirit of Jesus is not set in opposition to the Bible. Yet it is necessary for Schuller to make such a distinction to give him a basis for what he is doing. He must remove the Bible from his discussion. For if the Bible is taken seriously, he will be revealed as a false teacher. His views are so anti-biblical that he must take away the Bible as the standard for evaluating his teachings. Therefore, he creates a false tension between Jesus Christ and the Bible. He sets Jesus Christ against the Bible and, in so doing, denies the Bible as the Word of God.

What are we to do when the Bible contradicts what Jesus would have us do? Schuller says:

- For when an apparent contradiction or conflict or confusion exists within the sacred Scriptures, how shall the argument be settled? What interpretation shall reign? Whose opinion shall stand? And what will happen when self-esteem theologians have their own sincere and serious differences? *Then let Christ enter our minds as Lord over all.* The answers will be found in Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. (pp. 45-46) [emphasis mine]

When we come across something in the Bible that is contrary to what we think is right, then, we are supposed to look for some subjective feeling to tell us what is really right. But who tells us what the Spirit of Jesus is saying? Who becomes the authority? What happens is that man becomes the center of this theology. His reasoning becomes the authority. If the Bible does not agree with him, he can claim the Spirit of Jesus to override the Scripture.

- So, what would Jesus say if he could speak to us today? Would he tell us what miserable sinners we are? I think not. Deep down in our hearts I believe we know that Jesus would say something like this to us: "You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. You are a child of the Eternal. Follow me and I will make you fishers of men. Receive and enjoy the fruit of salvation: Self-esteem, self-worth. Hear God's call to you. He would save you for high and holy ser-

vice—to be proud of who you are. Then, stop putting yourself down. Start enjoying the dignity that is your God-intended destiny. (p. 47)

Is it true that if Jesus could speak to us today He would not tell us that we are sinners? In Luke 5:32 Jesus said, “I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.” He also said, “unless you repent, you will all likewise perish” (Luke 13:5). Jesus' message was one of calling sinners to repentance.

Salvation Experiences

In his book, Schuller details various salvation experiences including his own. Yet upon examination, these accounts seem to have little in common with biblical salvation. In his chapter on the “The Fatherhood of God,” Schuller gives details of a letter written by a woman in his congregation. In this letter, the woman describes the salvation experience of a couple who up until this point had been resistant to her request for them to visit her church:

- “Last Monday, September 21, 1981, I called Vivian to make a hair appointment for the following day. When she answered the telephone and I told her who was calling, she said, ‘Mary, I was almost ready to call you.’ Then Vivian went on to tell me that she had been very upset because of what had happened to Herb the week before.

“It seems that on Saturday evening Herb and Vivian had gone to the baseball game at Anaheim Stadium. While they were watching the game, Herb said, ‘I’ve got to get out of here for awhile. The people behind us are smoking and it is getting to me.’ Herb went to the lower level for some fresh air.

“After a half hour or so Vivian became worried when Herb didn’t return, so she went out to look for him. Vivian didn’t find Herb where she had expected him to be. With growing feelings of worry and concern, she continued her search until she heard a voice behind her asking, ‘Are you looking for me?’

“Vivian told him that she had begun to worry about him

when he hadn't come back to their seats. And Herb said, 'Vivian, you don't need to worry about me anymore.'

"When Vivian asked him what he meant, he told her that he had been standing where he could look across to 'Mary's church.' And he went on to describe his feelings as he looked at the lighted cross and the light reflections on the Crystal Cathedral. All of this turned his thoughts to God, and then Herb said, 'Vivian, I have made my peace with God, let's go home now.'

"Vivian and Herb walked out together to a point where they could see the Crystal Cathedral with its towering cross. While standing there, Vivian had a strange feeling. 'It was as if God were present at that very moment,' she said." (pp. 53-54)

Shortly after this, on the ride home, Herb began to experience shortness of breath and died moments later. But supposedly, according to this account, he had made his peace with God. Now whether he did truly make peace with God we do not know for sure—only God does. But, from what we read in this account, what was this peace based on? According to this, it was based on the lighted cross and the light reflections on the Crystal Cathedral.

Schuller also gives us the details of his testimony:

- One night I prayed, "Dear Jesus Christ, if you're alive, and I can't prove you are, I pray that you'll reach into my mind and take out this horrible fear. Save me." At that very moment I felt a pressure in my head as if a finger had gone down into the innermost recesses of my mind. Then I felt the "invisible finger" withdraw and a load of poisonous fear was drained from my mind, and I was at peace. (p. 130)

If someone were to give this testimony in church, would we conclude that this person was a believer?

According to Schuller, what does one need to do to be redeemed?

- If we will pray, "God deliver me from evil. God, move deep into my life so that I may know I have been saved from the potential of ever becoming an evil, destructive, negative per-

son. Come into my life, Christ, that I may be your beautiful person.” He will redeem us. We will experience salvation. (pp. 130-31)

Again, this is not what the Bible says a person must believe in order to be saved. There is no talk of Christ's substitutionary death, a turning from sin, and a willingness to deny oneself and follow Christ no matter what the cost. To Schuller salvation comes by asking God to save us from the potential of becoming evil and destructive people.

Schuller also gives an account of a visit he had with John Wayne shortly before the veteran actor was to undergo an operation because of cancer:

- I prayed for divine guidance all the way to the hospital. Should I come out and ask my friend Duke Wayne if he was prepared to meet God? I was strongly led to reject that approach. Should I ask, “Are you saved and forgiven and if you die tonight will you go to heaven?” The answer came clearly: “No, that is not what you are to say.”

Then I heard the “still small voice” that I identify as the Holy Spirit of the living Christ. It said to me, “Simply bring Jesus Christ into the mind of John Wayne. He will accept or reject Christ. That is what it’s all about.”

When I arrived at the hospital, I found the famous actor lying on the bed clad only in his shorts. We talked, we related, and then I asked, “Duke, may I pray for you?” His response came immediately, “You bet, Bob, I need all the help I can get.” I recall seeing his eyes close tightly, his rugged face taut with tension, as I prayed. Without planning or plotting or contriving to manipulate, I heard the following words come from my mouth, “Lord, John Wayne knows about you. He has heard about you all his life. He admires you. He respects you. And deep down he knows that you can and want to forgive him of all his sins. Deep down in his mind he accepts you and believes in you and loves you now.” (pp. 158-59)

Schuller then discusses how peaceful John Wayne looked and how he knew he had said the right things. What a tragic thing! Here was

a man sitting on the brink of eternity and Robert Schuller assured him that he was fine and that he was a child of God. Schuller did not want to discuss whether he was prepared to meet God or if he were saved or forgiven. When faced with a man who was near death, he did not share the Gospel.

The following assortment of comments made by Robert Schuller in his book are also cause for great concern:

God's Biggest Job

- Don't worry about humility. The easiest job for God to do is to keep you and me humble. God's biggest job is to get us to believe that we *are* somebody and that we really can *do* something. (p. 74)

Is that true that we do not have to worry about humility? The Scripture indicates that the opposite is true. Where in Scripture does it ever say that God's biggest job is to make us believe we are somebody?

Did Christ Die Because of Our Value?

- The death of Christ on the cross is central to our salvation. It is God's price tag on a human soul. If "Christ died for me," I must be of infinite value in God's sight. (p. 74)

This idea that "if Christ died for me, I must be of infinite value" is commonly heard today. The emphasis is on the worth of man. But notice what the Bible has to say about fallen man in Romans 3:10-12:

"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."
"THEIR THROAT IS AN OPEN GRAVE,
WITH THEIR TONGUES THEY KEEP
DECEIVING,"
THE POISON OF ASPES IS UNDER THEIR LIPS";
"WHOSE MOUTH IS FULL OF CURSING AND BITTERNESS";
"THEIR FEET ARE SWIFT TO SHED BLOOD,
DESTRUCTION AND MISERY ARE IN THEIR PATHS

AND THE PATH OF PEACE HAVE THEY NOT KNOWN."
 "THERE IS NO FEAR OF GOD BEFORE THEIR EYES."

The Bible also tells us that we are "by nature children of wrath" (Ephesians 2:3). God did not save us because of our great worth, He saved us in spite of ourselves. "For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly" (Romans 5:6). This idea that Jesus died for man because of man's worth denies the grace of God. Grace is God's unmerited favor. If Jesus had to die because we are of tremendous value then we are no longer saved by grace.

The Cross Sanctifies the Ego Trip

Any Bible believing Christian will be deeply disturbed over this next statement:

- Was Christ's self-esteem being fulfilled when he hung naked on a cross? That question should be contemplated alongside this theological statement: *The Cross sanctifies the ego trip*. For the Cross protected our Lord's perfect self-esteem from turning into sinful pride. (p. 75)

It is amazing that any man claiming to be a Christian could make such a statement. It is blasphemous to claim that the cross protected Jesus' self-esteem from turning into sinful pride.

- The Cross of Christ brings vitality to my dignity. If the deepest curse of sin is what it does to our self-esteem, then the atoning power of the Cross is what it does to redeem our discarded self-worth. (p. 101)

The cross is a testimony to the greatness of man's sin and the horrible price the sinless Son of God had to pay to redeem fallen man. How can anyone say that the cross brings vitality to our dignity?

The Meaning of Following Jesus

Concerning Matthew 16:24 in which Jesus says, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (NIV), Schuller says:

- "... And follow me"? What does that mean? It means daring to dream a great dream! (p. 119)

Is that what Jesus meant when He said, "Follow me"? To take up one's cross and follow Jesus means to be willing to deny oneself and follow Jesus Christ even to the point of death. Nowhere in this text can we come up with the idea that to follow Jesus means "to dream a great dream."

Conclusion

When we examine the teachings of Robert Schuller, there can only be one conclusion—the teachings of Robert Schuller are clearly unbiblical and should be rejected by all Bible-believing Christians. The doctrinal errors he is promoting are not minor but strike at the very nature of the Gospel. Though Dr. Schuller talks about salvation, redemption, reconciliation, sin, and being born again, he has twisted the meaning of these terms to such an extent that one could not be a true Christian if he accepted his reinterpretations of these key areas.

With Robert Schuller, then, we are not dealing with someone who is truly saved but is in error on a few minor matters. He is a man who is promoting heretical doctrine. As the apostle Paul said, "A little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough" (Gal. 5:9).

Error corrupts. That is why the church must carefully examine the teachings of men who claim to be Christian leaders. May God grant us the grace to be discerning in these difficult but exciting days.

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