

A Scriptural Analysis of the Self-Esteem Theology of Robert Schuller as to both its Inherent Dangers and Blessings, if Any

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Who is Robert Schuller and what does he stand for? Those questions have been asked frequently in the last few years. They have been answered just as frequently and with incredible diversity, especially since the publication of his book, *Self-Esteem: The New Reformation*. Schuller views himself as the author and chief proponent of an upbeat and positive reformation which will replace “the negative theology” produced by the Protestant Reformation of the 1500’s. Many have hailed Schuller as such a reformer. Influential individuals, both within and outside of theology have given wholehearted endorsement to Schuller’s ministry and message. And people do take note when Martin Marty, Paul Harvey, Billy Graham, Pat Robertson, Norman Vincent Peale and Theodore Hesburgh preface one’s books. On the other hand, many have pinpointed Schuller as the greatest abuser of Scripture and most dangerous heretic in America today. He has been called a cheerleader coming in the name of Christ. In a *Christian News* review of the aforementioned book Rev. Richard Neuhaus wrote, “Schuller is to Christian preaching what Phil Donohue is to moral philosophy.”

When assigned this paper last February in Pueblo I was somewhat acquainted with Robert Schuller’s philosophy of ministry. And I was familiar with some of the dangers in his theology. I was determined however to give the man a fair hearing: to read his books objectively and allow him to state his case. That has not been easy. His books are poorly planned and often repetitious; his message often as confusing as Mary Baker Eddy’s Christian Science; his theology full of contradictions and misinterpreted Scripture. I’ll attempt to give Robert Schuller a fair trial today by allowing him to speak for himself as much as possible. But I’ll also set Scripture side by side with his statements. Hopefully each of you will recognize his errors, as I did, and Schuller will “hang himself”.

The title of the paper calls for both the dangers and the blessings of Schuller’s Self-Esteem Theology to be highlighted. I’ve already tipped my hand as to which of those 2 categories will occupy much of this paper. In order to give you a better understanding as to how Schuller developed his erroneous theology I offer the following background material.

Brief Biographical Sketch

Robert Schuller grew up on a farm in northwest Iowa during the Great Depression. His roots run deep into Midwest agrarian philosophy as well as staunch Dutch Reformed theology. As a farm boy he learned self-reliance. As a student of the Heidelberg Catechism he learned Calvin’s brand of piety. Both play a prominent role in his own theology. Schuller was educated at Hope College and Western Theological Seminary, both in Holland, Michigan, a stronghold of Dutch Reformed theology. He says of his education, “I worked my way through college cleaning toilets while others concentrated on athletics and social pursuits.” His B.D. thesis was an indexing of all the Biblical references in John Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Schuller was not a brilliant scholar nor would he want to be recognized as such today. He was a very determined and persistent student, qualities which form the heart of his theology.

Schuller’s first pastorate was a small suburban congregation in Riverdale, Illinois, Ivanhoe Reformed Church. In the few years he spent at Ivanhoe there was considerable growth in the congregation. However, Schuller’s goal was to build a giant church from the bottom up. So he jumped at the opportunity to start a congregation in Orange County, California.

Garden Grove Community Church held its first service at the Orange Drive-In Theater in September of 1953. The innovative methods of evangelism, spectacular growth and dynamic pastor quickly made it one of the most recognized congregations in America. The endorsement and guest appearances of Norman Vincent Peale didn’t hurt either. Schuller’s strategy was not complex. He rang doorbells before it was popular to ring

doorbells. He asked people why they did not attend church. People told him they were tired of being hit over the head with condemning sermons. He told them about his new church, one which taught God's love and help with personal endeavors. People bought this "new" philosophy. Garden Grove Community Church grew. The congregation moved from the drive-in theater to its initial Worship-Education-Fellowship facility, the Tower of Power. Recently the congregation, which now numbers 10,400 moved into its new home: the 4000 seat Crystal Cathedral, with a price tag of \$20,000,000. The Crystal Cathedral has been variously labeled as either the most inspiring ecclesiastical structure of the century or a multi million dollar echo chamber. Whatever the truth as to its architectural merits the Crystal Cathedral stands as a monument to the impact of Schuller's theology on Orange County as well as the entire country.

Most people become acquainted with Schuller through his Hour of Power television broadcast, airing from Garden Grove since 1970. The show differs from most other daily and weekly electronic church productions in that its format is semi-liturgical as opposed to the talk show style. The show features hymns, choir anthems, solos, testimonies of possibility thinking by various guests, prayers, Schuller's weekly pep talk, an occasional reference to Scripture and a very positive Schuller-composed benediction. The Hour of Power is carried by 175 stations and has an estimated weekly audience of 3 million. Currently Schuller attracts a larger audience than Oral Roberts, Jerry Falwell, Jim Bakker, or Jimmy Swaggert. If offerings are a measure of a TV evangelist's impact then Schuller's show is very influential and successful. Donations last year were over \$10 million.

Robert Schuller is a prolific author as well as an evangelist and showman. I'm aware of 13 full length books plus an assortment of publications for his 4 day seminars on successful church leadership. The nature of his writings varies from devotional and theological with practical applications to unabashed advice on being successful in today's world. His best seller is *Discover Your Possibilities*. His most theological and controversial work is *Self-Esteem: The New Reformation*. But no matter what the title or original intent of a particular book the same message clearly comes through in all of Schuller published works: *Possibility Thinking, the Gospel of Success*.

I've read some of Schuller's books cover to cover; dabbled in others; burned still others after reading the introductions. I'm satisfied, and I think Schuller would be also, that the following are fair samplings of his message:

Are you disappointed, discouraged and discontented with the level of your success? Do you want to become a better and more beautiful person than you are today? Would you like to be proud of yourself and still not lose genuine humanity? Then start dreaming. It's possible. You can be the person you've always wanted to be! How? There is a Key—a Way—to turn impossible dreams into fantastic accomplishments. I call it Possibility Thinking. Some call it faith. (You Can be the Person You Want to Be)

You can discover the tremendous possibilities still waiting to be uncovered in your life! But you must first become a possibility thinker. Every person is either a possibility thinker or an impossibility thinker. The difference is in your attitude. I'm excited about the ideas God has allowed me to share with you. You will find exciting principles that will inspire you to discover how to be all you are meant to be. Begin today to live on top of the mountain, seeing the sunlight and feeling the warmth of God's love. Your possibilities are endless. (Discover Your Possibilities)

You will note that Schuller's message is very positive and encouraging. He wants everyone to be all that they can be, which in itself is decent advice. Also, Schuller is perhaps correct in believing that God lays possibilities and opportunities for success in front of each of us. But what are those possibilities? And what is success? Schuller never really answers those questions in a specific manner. While the illustrations he uses to reinforce his statements imply success in a business or social context. The tragic flaw of Schuller's philosophy or theology is that while he comes in the name of God too much of God's will is left unexplained. One's natural

reaction to Schuller's books is to believe that the sum total of God's will is that each human being attain his social and professional goals.

Possibility Thinking

When faced with a mountain I will not quit.

I will keep on striving until I climb over, find a pass through

Travel underneath or simply stay and turn the mountain into a gold mine with God's help. (The Possibility Thinker's Creed)

My impression is that self-esteem theology is just a souped-up version of possibility thinking, for years the main tenet of Schuller's theology. By calling his philosophy "self-esteem theology" Schuller is able to distinguish himself from others who have flooded the publishing market with self-help and potential realization manuscripts. He now gains attention in seminary classrooms instead of being confined to beauty parlors and office lunchrooms. One might distinguish between possibility thinking and self-esteem theology by calling self-esteem the spiritual cause and possibility thinking the practical result. But essentially the two are one in the same. One finds the same phrases and stories in *Discover Your Possibilities* as in *Self-Esteem: The New Reformation*. So I believe it is helpful in understanding Schuller if one first examines his goal, possibility thinking, before analyzing its almost identical twin, *Self-Esteem Theology*.

In the books whose titles contain the term possibility thinking four passages are repeatedly used to give Scriptural backing to Schuller's philosophy:

As a man thinks within himself, so he is. (Proverbs 23:7)

He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

(Philippians 1:6)

It is God who works in you to will and to act according to His good purpose. (Philippians 2:13)

I can do everything through Him who gives me strength. (Phil. 4:13)

Schuller's interpretation of these and similar passages is that "from day to day nothing is more important than self-reliance and self-confidence. How can you become the person God wants you to be if you can't believe in yourself?"

For now, never mind that Schuller's translation of the Proverbs passage is perhaps the weakest of the three translations the N.I.V. proposes. Never mind that the good work of Phil. 1:6 refers to the hope of salvation God instilled and has as little to do with self-produced confidence as 2 Peter 2:22 has to do with practical instruction in animal husbandry (A dog returns to its vomit. A sow that is washed goes back to her wallowing in the mud.) And never mind that the context of Phil 2:13 makes it encouragement to continue in the use of the Means of Grace, not reassurance that God wants us to realize all the dreams which He has placed into our minds. Never mind these abuses of Scripture interpretation for now. Allow Schuller to use the passages as the basis for his possibility thinking. We will address his misapplication of Scripture later.

What is possibility thinking then? Possibility thinking is exactly that—thinking or believing that something—indeed everything—is possible. "It is a form of mentalism or mind conditioning. Schuller is convinced that our minds control our lives. He states it boldly, "Power, success and achievement will come to you anywhere you are if your attitude is right," (Dennis Voskuil, *Reformed Journal*).

In reality then, all that Schuller has done over the last 30 years is restate the beliefs of Phineas Parkhurst Quimby, the author of mental healing and mind conditioning in the 19th century. Schuller has spiced up the message a bit with Bible passages. And he has gone a different direction than Quimby's most famous protegee, Mary Baker Eddy. But essentially he is preaching in a more complex manner the moral of the story entitled "The Little Engine that Could". If you prefer a more sophisticated analysis, Schuller is preaching at church the same doctrine psychology and biology professors expound in university lecture halls: there are definite

connections between mental attitude and the biological and chemical performance of the human body. Schuller's philosophy on life put simply: Yank yourself up by your own mental bootstraps and get after it!! Where does God, more specifically Christ, fit into the picture? Schuller writes,

Do you want to succeed and have dynamic force in your life? Then ask Christ into your life and accept him. (Discover Your Possibilities, p.40) Jesus Christ has helped you to put down cigarettes, drinking, narcotics, hurt, etc.—and as you look back you see that it's like being converted. And that is conversion. (D.Y.P., p. 76)

I know that ultimately you will never be the person you want to be, you will never solve the problems you want to solve, until you make a real deep commitment to Jesus Christ. (D.Y.P., p. 95)

Simply put, Christ is the great cheerleader in the sky or within you as you strive to attain your goals.

The preceding are examples of Christ's work being misunderstood, or at best misapplied. They are easily recognized as errors. What follows is a far more dangerous application of the name and work of Christ. Schuller states,

No psychiatrist or therapy can change human behavior like the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the power of God. (D.Y.P., p. 170)

That's good stuff. I'd use that line in any sermon. But Schuller follows that line with the story of an unemployed black man who overcame prejudice and depression in order to land a job. He did so after seeing the Hour of Power and believing that God wanted him to have a job. The truth is that the job was available all along. But the guy did not apply until he thought Jesus wanted him to apply. The tragedy is not that the man waited so long, but that Schuller used this story in this context. Even though he has stated *a* truth about the influence of Christ on human lives he does not follow with *the* truth: Christ has earned forgiveness for us and now through the power of God's Spirit we respond to our forgiveness with love. Instead readers are again led to believe that the Christ is a secret power, which if summoned often enough helps them to attain their secular goals.

At the heart of Schuller's possibility thinking is psychology and psychiatry. He takes great pride in that. He believes he is in the behavioral modification business.

Everyone has a red and green button. Push the red button and they explode. Push the green and they mellow into a passive, joyful God-pleasing existence (D.Y.P., p. 180)

He believes in a type of self-hypnosis.

This is not a trance, but letting yourself be filled with a positive concept or dream. (D.Y.P., p. 134)

He refers to the writings of Freud, Adler and current leaders in the field of psychiatry more than he quotes Christ, Paul or John. If Schuller's possibility thinking were only a psychiatric theory we might not be alarmed. But he preaches in the name of Christ and his theory is therefore not philosophical but theological. Souls, and not just button-governed minds, are then at stake.

Much of what Robert Schuller writes is sound advice and motivation. It's the stuff lockerroom pep talks are made of. Teddy Roosevelt and Knute Rockne would no doubt become Schuller disciples. The philosophy jibes with the ads featuring Jon Hausmann a few years back: "At Smith-Barney we make money the old fashioned way, we earn it." But two aspects of possibility thinking in particular bothered me as I read Schuller's books. And I feel we are forced to condemn possibility thinking as the heresy it is.

First, possibility thinking emasculates the Gospel. The word Christ occurs often. But seldom (once in 13 occurrences in one chapter) is Christ identified as the Savior from sin. More typically He is called the Ideal One; the one who we are to imitate; the one who gives us the power to succeed. So the emphasis is shifted, purposely I believe, from what Christ accomplished as our Redeemer to what our buddy Jesus can help us accomplish in this life.

Secondly, if possibility thinking is carried to its logical conclusion anything and everything is justified in the pursuit of success. According to Schuller a certain religious leader in Iran and general in Libya might be classified as excellent possibility thinkers. That is perhaps far-fetched. Schuller would not condone their loveless tactics. Robert Schuller does teach love of one's fellow man. Yet, that is not an oft repeated theme. The underlying theme, which appeals to the ambitious (sinful?) nature in each of us, is that the Lord has given me the opportunity to get ahead and wants me to succeed. Therefore, "Go For It".

Self-Esteem Theology

I believe that Robert Schuller would much rather be characterized as a missionary than a dogmatist. That would be easier to do if held stuck with his original goal, bringing Christ into the lives of the people of Garden Grove, California. But with his books Schuller attempts to answer questions about the human condition, the role of Christ, the order of salvation and the distinction between Law and Gospel. Those topics are not just part of missiology, they are dogmatics, in fact the heart of dogmatics. And therefore we are justified in weighing the teachings of Robert Schuller's self-esteem theology against Scripture and our own confessional writings.

As Schuller defines it, self-esteem is: the divine dignity that God intended to be our emotional birthright as children created in his image. It was lost in the Garden. We hunger for it until we regain it through Christ. (p. 20) In all fairness, as I mentioned earlier, those words can be properly understood. They sound very similar to Paul's thoughts in Romans 8, "The creation waits in eager expectation ...to be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God." Granted, Paul is speaking more of our hope of heaven. Schuller is speaking of hope in this lifetime through Christ. Still, the statement can stand on its own merits.

When criticized for his choice of the term self-esteem Schuller granted its weaknesses. He considered other terms which proved even worse. He certainly does not equate self-esteem with a sinful sense of pride. But because of the limitations of the English language he has stuck with the term and offers this secondary definition:

True self-esteem is the sense of value that comes to me when I've been restored to a relationship with God my Father and I have the assurance I'm worth something. Christ died on the cross for me. If he thinks that much of me, I'd better think something good about myself.(p. 22)

Again, those thoughts could be properly understood.

One more item of interest, particularly for us as a Lutheran church with a German heritage, before we move to the specifics of self-esteem theology. You might wonder why Robert Schuller feels this urgent need for a new theology that makes people feel good about themselves. What is wrong with the Gospel we proclaim in the W.E.L.S. for instance? Luther felt pretty relieved and valuable after hearing that Gospel. We feel the same way. So why doesn't Schuller join the W.E.L.S.? I think Schuller would include our church body in this blanket accusation and would therefore feel very uncomfortable in our circles:

We continue to stress self-flagellation in Protestant and Catholic circles; leaving people with a negative view of themselves. They feel they will be cleansed and atone for their sins when they get a low enough self-image (pps. 113,114). Justification is true and fine. But it's not connected to every day life and does

not give us sufficient cause to eradicate all that is wrong and sinful: poverty, depression, etc. Do you need proof? Germany, which prided itself on the great theology of Luther, gave birth to Hitler. We can't have a successful theology of social ethics because we have overemphasized unworthiness of people and made them feel that they can't do good works.(p- 145)

You recognize the faulty logic concerning Luther and Hitler. More importantly, notice Schuller's failure to properly understand the relation between justification, God declaring us righteous, and sanctification in the narrow sense, our daily life of love in response. Apparently Schuller, who claims to cherish the book of Romans, has forgotten one of the key verses from that book, chapter 12, verse 1. "Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—which is your spiritual worship." But at least now you know what Schuller thinks of church bodies such as our own who maintain "that of all doctrines the foremost and most important is the doctrine of justification." (Walther's *Law and Gospel*, p. 5)

I won't attempt to analyze all the specific doctrines of Robert Schuller's self-esteem theology. Recall that his background is Reformed. So, it's a given that he does not have much use for the inerrancy of Scripture (as we define inerrancy), the work of the Holy Spirit in conversion, or the sacraments as Means of Grace. In addition, Schuller has been disavowed by many reformed church bodies for his murky explanations of the deity of Christ, the resurrection and a literal hell. Hell, for instance, is defined as "the loss of a person's self-esteem and the loss of a soul's self-respect." That's quite a bit different from Jesus' own announcement of judgment and confinement to hell in Matthew 25. "Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels." What is true of most false teachers is also true of Robert Schuller. He uses the Scriptural terms which we are accustomed to hearing but attaches an entirely different meaning to those terms.

I've chosen four areas or doctrines of Schuller's theology for us to examine. To be fair to him as one who claims to be an evangelist I selected four teachings which relate directly to Gospel outreach, that is, making known to the unchurched person what God has done for his eternal salvation.

The Role of the Church and Evangelism

Schuller says of himself, "I am a communicator of spiritual reality to the unchurched who don't know God. The question which constantly burns in my mind is 'Where can I best invest my life to tell others about Jesus Christ?'" (p.120) Of the local congregation, "A congregation should be a mission first and a church second." about the Hour of Power, "This is not a normal worship service for those who already know God. We want to reach the unchurched who don't yet know of God's love. We address the needs of our members in separate Bible classes. (140) On the value of humanity, "We must visualize every person as precious and valued in God's sight with vast untapped possibilities of service to God and his fellow man." (156)

I don't believe we can fault any of those statements as they stand. Although Paul urged regular church members to grow in their faith by not forsaking the practice of worshipping together. That wouldn't quite jibe with Schuller's thoughts on the Hour of Power as worship for his regular members. Otherwise the statements are all a reflection of the Great Commission of Matthew 28. In fact I've used that phrase, "we're a mission first, a church second," in several of my own sermons. I do find Schuller's comments on the Hour of Power somewhat deceptive with regard to the show's outreach intent. Since Christmas I've watched as many segments of the show as possible. And much of the time the message is not truly targeted at the unchurched. For instance, the theme of his "pep talk" or sermon of January 20th was *How to Break Through from Poverty to Prosperity* (also available in pamphlet form if you're interested) There was no biblical text. Tithing as mentioned in Malachi 3:10 was presented as the sure way to prosperity. Give God his weekly 10% and He's obligated to bless you was the thrust of this homiletical disaster. Sin was not mentioned. The name of Christ was never spoken. Gospel-motivated stewardship of wealth was never hinted at. That is hardly the stuff with which to "reach the unchurched who don't know the love of God."

Holy Scripture

As mentioned earlier Robert Schuller espouses Biblical inerrancy, but like so many others, he does so with his own definition of inerrancy. He does believe that the Bible is God's revelation of His will for humanity. But he also believes, "that the eternal Word transcends the written Word." (p. 45)

We could probably overlook Schuller's qualifications of inerrancy if he still managed to present the truth concerning sin and salvation in his ministry. Certainly there are worse opinions of Scripture's authority floating around in the religious world. But we should take note of these two questionable practices on Schuller's part.

First, he uses Scripture as he deems it necessary, often not as the basis for his teaching, but for occasional support of his teaching. When questioned on his relatively few references to Scripture during the Hour of Power Schuller said,

I admit I don't hold up a Bible. I don't deliver Biblical exposition. I don't jam the Bible down people's throats. I believe in the Bible, but if people want Bible preaching, they can get it elsewhere. (p. 13, *Reformed Journal*)

Secondly, Robert Schuller repeatedly takes Scripture passages out of context and distorts their meaning. I gave three examples of this earlier. I offer one more from a list of 17 compiled during the reading of his last 2 books. Deuteronomy 32:11 states, "Like an eagle that stirs up its nest and hovers over its young, that spreads its wings to catch them and carries them on its pinions." In quoting this passage Schuller stops with the word "wings". He then uses the passage as proof that God's desire for each of us is that we soar like an eagle in pursuit of our dreams. Schuller was correct in the previous paragraph. He doesn't "deliver good Biblical exposition." This particular passage is a part of the Song of Moses. In it Moses praises God for the manner in which He blessed and preserved the people of Israel. In verse 11 Moses compares God's protecting Israel to an eagle's protecting its young. The soaring eagle is our God, not our self-induced positive attitude. These two examples give an idea of the liberty Schuller takes with Scripture. That may not seem so outrageous now. It becomes more crucial in the next two sections as the mishandling and distortion of Scripture lead Schuller into error concerning salvation. But even now, having seen his half-hearted use of Scripture, one wonders what Schuller does with Romans 10:17. "Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ."

Sin

No subject has caused Schuller as much grief as his definition and explanation of sin. Listen to a few of his vague and watered down ideas on sin and you will see why he's deservedly received so much flak.

Original Sin in man: "Our rebellion is a reaction, not our nature. By nature we're fearful, not bad. Original sin is not a mean streak; it's a non-trusting inclination, a negative self-image. The central core of the human soul is not wickedness." (p. 67)

Temptation to sin: "The greatest temptation is to not take up the cross of dreams and possibilities God has given you." (p. 113)

Jesus and sin: "Christ never called anyone on earth a sinner. (p. 103) If he could speak to us today would he tell us what sinners we are? I think not!" (p. 47)

Preaching on sin: "The proclamation of the truth of one's own sin only drives the nails of unworthiness deeper until promises of forgiveness lack the power to loosen and extract the spike of sin, self-condemnation and guilt. Speaking about sin only encourages one to sin more."

I believe that Schuller's doctrine of sin is the weakest aspect of his theology and that which causes the rest of his system to deteriorate into a garbled hodge-podge. John did not mince words, "Sin is lawlessness" (1 John 3:4). David wrote, "I have been ... sinful from the time my mother conceived me." (Psalm 51:5) In Romans Paul told us that "we all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." (3:23) And in his letter to the Ephesian Christians he explained, "You were dead in your transgressions and sins ... objects of wrath." (2:1,3)

Robert Schuller would prefer not to use those passages. I understand why. No one is particularly enamored with the prospect of pointing out another's sin. And Schuller may be partially correct in believing that too many "30 minute Gospel messages allot 29 minutes to sin." There is no denying that sin can be overemphasized since the section on sin is often the easiest part of the sermon to write and illustrate. However, abuses of sin-preaching do not justify the abolishment of the message. A backwoods preacher who appeared on the Old Time Gospel Hour perhaps summed up the necessity of preaching sin in a way that his fellow TV evangelist, Robert Schuller, should learn to do. "If you don't know what you done, you don't appreciate what God done." (B.R. Laken)

Law and Gospel

A misunderstanding of sin leads to a mishandling of the Law and Gospel. Schuller believes that even though his definition of sin and style in approaching the unchurched are new he has not changed the substance of the Gospel. Nothing could be further from the truth. If indeed Robert Schuller were proclaiming the pure Gospel he would never express such a lack of faith in the Gospel and such a confused Law and Gospel message as he does in his books. "The Gospel message is not only faulty, but potentially dangerous, if it has to put a person down before it attempts to lift him up. I protest all proclamations of portended Christian messages that attack the dignity of the person while attacking the sin. (p. 127) How can you possibly approach a person who feels inferior and unworthy with an invitation to believe in a holy God who hates sin and wants to punish the sinner?" (p. 64)

I've read the preceding quotations at least a dozen times. I still find it hard to believe that an individual who claims to preach the pure Gospel of Christ could so utterly distort that Gospel. Since when does the proclamation that Christ is your Savior "put one down before it lifts him up"? And since when is the Gospel message we offer to the spiritually downtrodden a threat that God wants to punish their wickedness. The more of Schuller I read the more I'm convinced that his whole heresy is a confusion of Law and Gospel, what they are and how to apply them.

Dr. Walther's 3rd Thesis in *Law and Gospel* is "Rightly distinguishing the Law and Gospel is the most difficult and highest art of Christians in general and of theologians in particular. It is taught only by the Holy Spirit in the school of experience." Anyone who has endeavored to understand, teach and apply these 2 great doctrines of Scripture has experienced the difficulty Walther writes of. Lay people aren't sure if their unchurched neighbor first needs to hear about his sinfulness or his Savior. A called worker isn't always sure whether the soul in his care needs to be knocked down with the Law or comforted with the Gospel. Certainly each of us is the clay jar carrying treasures as Paul stated. But if anything the knowledge of our imperfection in handling God's truth should lead us to pray more fervently and strive even harder for a spirit which correctly presents the 2 great teachings of Scripture. Bob Schuller chooses not to make that effort. He takes the easy way out. He is a man who despises cop outs. Yet he is, from a theological standpoint, a gigantic cop out. Instead of striving to present Scriptural Law and Gospel he went the easy route. He produced his own modified version of Law and Gospel to fit his brand of theology: self-esteem and possibility thinking.

In reading Schuller's books over the last few months one question has repeatedly come to mind. Why is Robert Schuller afraid to proclaim the genuine Law and Gospel? Why back off from declaring with Paul, "God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (Romans 5:8) I know Schuller's pat answers. He does not want to completely alienate an already weary, unchurched soul by slapping

him across the face with God's Law. And he believes he's probed deeper into the human experience and discovered lack of self-confidence, not sin, to be our greatest problem. I don't doubt Bob Schuller's sincerity. I believe he has a genuine interest in human souls. And I question a simplistic analysis which finds Schuller avoiding the use of the Law in order to maintain popularity. But the truth is this: sin is our greatest problem. It is the cause not the effect of our lack of self-esteem. Why is Bob Schuller afraid to go after sin? I believe that deep down he doubts the ability of the Gospel to overcome sin. He implied as much earlier, "the promises of forgiveness lack the power to loosen and extract the spike of sin." And so I am left praying that an individual as influential as Robert Schuller will someday be led by God's Spirit to a deeper understanding and appreciation of this passage: "I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes."

Dangers and Blessings Inherent in Self-Esteem Theology

The assignment calls for not only an analysis of self-esteem theology but also a list of its inherent dangers and blessings, if any. I've alluded to some of each throughout the paper. Any list of this sort will not be comprehensive nor objective. I'll include only what I believe to be the most potentially helpful and threatening aspects of self-esteem theology. Feel free to critique these selections. I sincerely hope you will voice your opinions. You know your individual members better than I. You know what they can use from self-esteem theology and what might prove disastrous for their faith.

Blessings

1. Robert Schuller is nothing if not positive. His view of life, the church and the ministry is upbeat at all times. His theology stresses the value of a human being and encourages the individual to make the best possible use of his God-given talents and opportunities. You do not feel bad about yourself after listening to Robert Schuller. We could all use a dose of his positive outlook toward life in general, toward the church in particular.
2. Schuller believes that no matter how large the congregation, it must be a mission first and a church second. The intent of the Hour of Power (supposedly) is to reach the unchurched. The record shows that Schuller has done that. Many of his present members were formally unchurched and have been exposed to Christ through Schuller's ministry. It would not hurt us to remember at all times that every congregation is a mission.
3. Unlike some other TV evangelists Schuller does not believe that watching the Hour of Power is an adequate weekly dose of religion. He advocates membership in a local congregation for all of his viewers. He urges his members in Garden Grove to attend Bible classes. Three of my "better members" read Schuller's books and watch his show faithfully. I call them better members because of their consistent use of the Means of Grace available in our congregation. That says to me that we can fill a void which Schuller's TV ministry leaves: membership in a local congregation.
4. Schuller's greatest concern seems to be that he does not scare off potential converts by hammering them with the Law. He goes too far of course in that he rarely refers to the Law. I suppose we could argue among ourselves "theory" of approaching the unchurched for the better part of this day: Law first or "God loves you" first. Self-esteem theology, whether right or wrong in its approach and content, at least reminds us to consider the helplessness and hopelessness which an unchurched person has had to live with.
5. The heart of self-esteem theology is believing that one can accomplish his goals. It's a variation of Norman Vincent Peale's "power of Positive Thinking". Sometimes that is just the message an individual needs to hear: "You have the ability and desire deep within you, now get after it."

Dangers

1. Self-esteem theology downplays the role of God's Word as the source of truth in matters of Christian living. Also, in many instances Scripture passages are taken out of context, misapplied and misinterpreted. The impression is often given that Scripture should only be used to support one's own ideas.

2. Self-esteem theology minimizes the seriousness of sin. Sin is called “a lack of trust” instead of a violation of God’s law. At times I got the impression that it was actually God’s fault for creating us with a nature which lacks trust.
3. As with all “mind over matter” theologies a person can very easily begin to question his faith if God does not deliver success on his own terms.
4. Self-esteem theology, at least as Schuller has presented it to this point, gives precious little credit to Christ for redemption and the Holy Spirit for sanctification.
5. Whether purposely or not, self-esteem theology often gives the impression that true happiness comes only when one attains his self-established social and economic goals. In his Hour of Power sermon of January 20th, mentioned earlier, and his book, *Discover Your Possibilities*, the message was very clear: get out of poverty in order to be happy.
6. There is a real danger that lay people will come to expect Schuller type preaching from their pastors. The flipside of that coin is that pastors will begin to wonder if they should perhaps incorporate more of self-esteem theology into their own ministries.
7. In self-esteem theology the pure Gospel message is diluted at best. The name of Christ occurs often enough. He is acknowledged as the Savior from sin. He is the “Ideal One who restores our self-esteem as the Father’s children.” As I’ve stated before this and other statements from self-esteem theology can be properly understood. However, almost every Gospel announcement is followed by an illustration of a person who accepted Christ’s salvation and then struck it rich. Intentional or not, the message seems clear: God can help you make it: just believe in Christ and ask Him.
8. Self-esteem theology urges one to draw closer to God. In actuality one grows further apart from God as he digs down deep within himself to produce the determination to succeed. The name of Christ is present to be sure. But again, that word “Christ” serves often times as a mantra and the real power comes from within oneself.
9. The response to God’s Gospel is a life of love and service on the part of the Christian. The response to Schuller’s “Gospel” is a life of service to oneself first and foremost with God’s whole-hearted approval.

I can’t characterize the danger of Robert Schuller’s self-esteem theology any better than Kenneth Kantzer did in an analysis for *Christianity Today*: Robert Schuller is so earnestly jealous to win people and make them happy, that he jeopardizes the possibility of making them holy. Jesus Christ is Savior. It is important to say that He saves from a low self-image, one that fails to account for the value of a human soul. But Jesus is not just that. He is also the Savior from sin and all its consequences. And we dare not divide the elements of the Gospel which our Lord keeps together. (p.24)

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Most of the quotations in section II of the paper are from the book, *Discover Your Possibilities*. Most of those in section III, concerning self-esteem theology, are from the book, *Self-Esteem: The New Reformation*.

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