

## Robert Schuller: Sugar & Spice Gospel of Success

The media are having a hard look at television evangelists and Robert Schuller is no exception. Who has not heard of the Crystal Cathedral with its fountains, huge sliding doors, the world's largest organ and slick T. V. programs, and wonder at all the glitter, pomp and show? What lies behind Schuller's method and message?

Inner healing, positive mental attitude, positive thinking and development contribute to the growing confusion inside the Church. Robert Schuller, a Reformed Church of America minister and prolific author, has become one of the principle advocates of the Gospel of Success. His message has been shaped by the media. Schuller purposely emphasizes the benefits the listener can receive from Christ's sacrifice on the cross, rather than the consequences of sin. Don't expect him to call sinners to repentance! Schuller writes:

I don't think anything has been done in the name of Christ and under the banner of Christianity that has proven more destructive to human personality and, hence, counterproductive to the evangelism enterprise than the often crude, uncouth, and unchristian strategy of attempting to make people aware of their lost and sinful condition.

Robert Harold Schuller was born into a devout Dutch Reformed American family in Iowa. He received his education at Hope College and Western Theological Seminary, Holland, Michigan. As a student he became well versed in *Calvin's Institutes of the Christian Religion*. He spent three years of his seminary training preparing a topical Scripture index to the entire work. As he studied the theology of the reformer he felt that there were gaps, which he proceeded to fill with his own theology of self-esteem.

In this article I intend to highlight a few key concepts of Schuller's theology to show where he differs from historic Reformed thinking. Schuller describes his theology as Possibility Thinking, the systematic theology of self-esteem, which bears the mark of his mentor Dr. Norman Vincent Peale.

### 1. Dr. Vincent Peale

Dr. Vincent Peale, also a minister in the RCA, both fascinated and challenged Robert Schuller. He credits Peale with laying the foundation of his own Possibility Thinking, which is just another brand name for Peale's product called Positive Thinking.

Peale assumes that self-realization is a central principle of personality. He began his famous best seller *The Power of Positive Thinking* with, "Believe in yourself! Have faith in your abilities! . . . self confidence leads to self-realization and successful achievement." Despite the frequent references to Scripture, the overriding emphasis is on man's ability to change for the better. The case histories recorded are meant to show how prayer and faith have enabled someone to become an achiever or to gain success. Robert Schuller's book, *It's Possible*, has the same thesis. Have an optimistic approach to life! Use God's power and your own self-confidence to turn impossible situations into

new possibilities. Schuller's sermon themes are like Peale's, turning "stress into strength," and self-love as a "dynamic force for success."

## **2. The Theology of Self-Esteem**

Schuller contends that he is trying to reach the modern man who is not acquainted with Scripture. What is modern man's basic dilemma? He is in need of self-esteem. You cannot bring about effective change within personalities by violating their self-esteem and the consequent loss of dignity. Man is of infinite value, who should love himself. Each person can change his own life. If he tries hard enough, he can achieve anything he wishes. We can "visualize" ourselves into success. Exercise the power within you. Be positive about yourself. Even Christ's ministry is framed in the context of a success oriented, no-room-for-failure society. Jesus Himself is called the "world's greatest possibility thinker." Of the role of Christ in his own congregation Schuller writes:

Ever since that day when I surrendered my church to Jesus Christ and asked Him to run the business, the center chair where I, as presiding chairman of the board sat, is an empty chair. The members of the board know that Christ is there. We believe that this is His business and expect to receive inspiration, bright ideas, and courage from Him.

The apostle Paul's saying that Christ "emptied himself, taking the form of a bondservant . . . (and) humbled himself by becoming obedient to . . . death on a cross" (Phil. 2:7, 8) is interpreted by Schuller to mean

Jesus knew His worth, His success fed His self-esteem . . . He suffered the cross to sanctify His self-esteem: And He bore the cross to sanctify your self-esteem. And the cross will sanctify the ego trip.

Schuller's philosophy is appealing to the North American success ideal society, which tries to deny pain, focusing instead on good health, an "adequate" standard of living, and the achievement of physical comfort. Since the positive must be up front, the negative, or the dark side of life, is downplayed.

## **3. Sin**

In his laudable eagerness to win secular modern man for the Gospel, Schuller avoids Biblical themes like conscience, guilt, atonement and unabashedly "sweetens" Scripture in order to make its message more palatable. Schuller's view of sin is a reaction to the overemphasis in popular Calvinism on predestination, human depravity and self-effacement. Indeed, Calvinism has been guilty of stressing man's rebellious heart to such an extent that even after conversion a negative self-effacing acid even self debasing image remains. Dr. Anthony A. Hoekema once observed,

Sad to say ... many of us tend to look . only at the depravity and not at our renewal. We have been writing our continuing sinfulness in capital letters, and

our newness in Christ in small letters. We believe in our depravity so strongly we think we have to practice it, while we hardly dare to believe in our newness.

But how Biblical is Schuller? His upbeat theology of optimism does not view man as a sinner in the hands of an angry and holy God, entirely in need of grace and mercy. He does not see sin as an outright rebellion against God or even as centering on pride or human utter selfishness. Man is of infinite value, fully capable of personal and social betterment. Sin is negative thinking, having a poor self image. It is essentially a weakness, or a helplessness, an inability to trust anyone. Schuller's view of sin is based more on Dr. Erik Erikson's teachings than on Scripture. Dr. Erikson, a prominent figure in the field of child psychiatry, believes that children are born without trust. Trust is a learned response. The Nasons, close associates of Schuller, write,

Bob cites accepted practices in neonatal care units around the country, where nurses are instructed to stroke and talk to the tiny premature infants in their care. He equates this to his own pulpit strategy, he smiles a lot, makes people relax and laugh; he's giving them sounds and strokes because he believes that people who don't trust need to be stroked.

#### **4. Evaluation**

Schuller's view of sin is the missing link in his theology, which in turn influences his whole ministry and evangelism methodology. When the doctrine of sin is weak, the doctrine of Christ's atoning work becomes affected. William Wilberforce (1759-1833) observed already in his day the lack of a sense of sin as a major defect. He wrote that without a sense of sin; and therefore of need, the logic of God's grace becomes meaningless.

The Gospel is not just the good news of the value of the human soul. The Gospel is the joyous declaration that the holy God in Christ reaches out to save sinners. Our Lord did not preach a gospel of self-esteem. He spoke more about hell than about heaven. Our tender loving Lord never hesitated to call sin sin. Schuller "neutralizes" sin as a negative concept by evading its stark reality. And in doing so, the classical consequences of sin-tragedy, poverty, suffering-are left without an adequate answer. Possibility thinking alone is simply not enough to turn pain into gain, to do justice to the poor and to alleviate hunger.

Schuller's theology is functional rather than dogmatic. Know what you want and aim to get it. His books and television sermons are illustrated by catchy slogans and stories supporting his basic theme. I believe that Schuller proclaims a gospel of cheap grace, a Christian life without cross bearing, a faith devoid of profound mysteries.

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