

The Cross and the Theology of Self-Esteem

Book Review

Self-Esteem: The New Reformation

By Robert H. Schuller,
(Word Books, 1983)

Reviewed by

Richard A. Rhem
Minister of Preaching and Theological Inquiry
Christ Community Church
Spring Lake, Michigan

Published in
Perspectives
A Journal of Reformed Thought
March 1986, pp. 10-13

The way of Jesus in this world led to crucifixion. God raised him up. Thus we have a gospel to proclaim, but only Jesus stands beyond the cross; our history is lived out under the shadow of the cross; those who follow Jesus are called to costly discipleship. An authentic biblical theology must embrace the cross and bring to expression the dying to self and denial of self, symbolized in the cross of Jesus and the cross Jesus calls us to bear.

Does the theology of self-esteem outlined by Robert H. Schuller in his book, *Self-Esteem: The New Reformation*, meet the above criterion? Is there place for the cross in a theology of Self-Esteem?

Schuller sketched the appearance of Christian theology, viewed from the perspective of self-esteem, which he contends is the deepest need of the human person. The whole spectrum of biblical truth is seen in light of this need. The traditional content of Reformed theology, which is Schuller's heritage, is not changed, but the perspective of fundamental human need as a starting point does put that traditional content in a new light. That new light changes dramatically the appropriate approach to people. This is not surprising since this is theological understanding which arises from the pulpit, from the heart of an evangelist, and the passion of an apologist for the faith.

Schuller's conviction that the deepest need of the human person is the need for self-esteem or a sense of self-worth is coupled with an equally critical conviction — the dignity of the human person. The content of the gospel addresses the

person's deepest need; the approach to the person is determined by the infinite value of the human person created in the image of God.

Robert Schuller has called for a daring and creative rethinking of biblical faith; indeed, for a new reformation. He has written a call to action, drawing a first, tentative outline of what a theology of self-esteem would look like. He invites the church to think with him and to go beyond him. He is convinced that it is possible to move beyond our Reformation theology, characterized by reaction, into a new age characterized by expanded mission.

His own ministry of over thirty years has gained him a worldwide hearing. His credentials are established. Now he has moved beyond concrete demonstration into the area of theological reflection. He invites us to join him on the journey. To do so we must be certain that the gospel of Jesus Christ centered in the crucifixion and resurrection comes to full expression. Let us seek to discover from his own writing whether this is the case.

The Human Person

Central to Schuller's understanding of both the content and approach of the gospel is the dignity of the human person. He claims:

Historically, the Church does not have a commendable success record in its effort to purge sinful pride out of Christ's followers without insulting, demeaning, and bringing dishonor to God's beautiful children.

The theological task to which Schuller calls the church is to discover

a full-orbed theological system beginning with and based on a solid central core of religious truth—the dignity of man. And let us start with a theology of salvation that addresses itself at the outset to man's deepest need, the "will to self worth."

He is insistent at this point:

No theology of salvation, no theology of the Church, no theology of Christ, no theology of sin and repentance and regeneration and sanctification and discipleship, can be regarded as authentically Christian if it does not begin with and continue to keep its focus on the right of every person to be treated with honor, dignity, and respect. At the same time, any creed, any biblical interpretation, and any systematic theology that assaults and offends the self-esteem of persons is heretically failing to be truly Christian....

Such forceful affirmations raise questions about Schuller's view of human nature and the human condition. Is he naïve about the demonic potential of the human

person? Is he not aware of the record of human history written in blood, laced with violence? Is his a Pollyanna view of the human situation, a refusal to see the darkness? That is scarcely the case; he does, however, make a critical distinction between the nature of the human person and the actual human condition. Human nature is marked by wonder and dignity, a reflection of the image of God in which the person was created. The human condition is marked by a reactive behavior which is not reflective of human nature but by a denial of that nature. The rebellious actions of a person are reactions, not the expression of a person's true nature:

By nature we are fearful, not bad. Original sin is not a mean streak; it is a non-trusting inclination. 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. I am humanly unable to correct my negative self-image until I encounter a life-changing experience with nonjudgmental love bestowed upon me by a Person whom I admire so much that to be unconditionally accepted by him is to be born again.

Schuller uses the illustration of the golf ball. The outside dimpled surface gives little hint of what is really inside. Rebellion is our surface appearance. Why the rebellion? At the center of the golf ball is a hard rubber core. Around that core is a maze of stretched rubber wrappings. The core represents a negative self-image or an intrinsic lack of trust or simply fear. The stretched rubber wrappings are the reactions of that fear-filled core—all the anxieties and fearful reactions of negative emotions which surface as the rebellious exterior—angry, mean, violent.

To use Schuller's analogy, emanating from the core of the person constituted of fear, feelings of inferiority, and doubt are all forms of demonic behavior—enough to create hell on earth, presenting to the world an angry face. What is wrong with humankind is the ego run amuck, an ego threatened, insecure, desperately trying to establish itself, prove itself, justify itself, make something of itself. The consequence is sin and misery. One can hardly accuse Schuller of naiveté in regard to the darkness of the human situation.

He is not content, however, simply to explain it in terms of wicked human nature. He asks why the human person reacts as he does. He finds the biblical picture of human sinfulness corroborated and explained by insights from the behavioral sciences. He sees the ego with its destructive potential reacting negatively because instead of trust which liberates for love, there is at the core a lack of trust which issues in fear, love's opposite.

What is needful? To be born again—changed from a negative to a positive self-image through an experience of grace in an encounter with Jesus Christ.

Beginning with a strong conviction that every person must be treated with respect and accorded the dignity that is his because he is created in the image of God, Schuller has probed beneath the surface of human sin and rebellion to understand that one acts, not according to his nature, but reacts out of an intrinsic fear and lack of trust. That being the case, the approach to people is all important, and it is here that he is critical of the traditional approach of much of the church.

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. The self-image will always incarnate itself in action. A negative diagnosis will become a self-fulfilling prophecy. The most difficult task for the Church to learn is how to deal honestly with the subject of “negativity,” “sin,” and “evil” without doing the cause of redemption more harm than good.

The Place of the Cross

The cross of Jesus Christ plays a central role in the theology of self-esteem, and self-esteem is the perspective from which the cross is discussed. Therefore it may appear that Schuller reinterprets the meaning of the atonement, but that simply is not the case.

He claims, “The Cross is the central force in the kingdom of God.” He discusses this claim under the double aspect of the cross of Christ and the cross of the Christian.

Christ’s death for us witnesses to the infinite value we have in God’s sight. Such a realization changes one inside. The core of fear and lack of trust, which is the generating center of all negativity and rebellion, is transformed into trust and security—a positive sense of worth, liberating one in turn to extend love and forgiveness to others.

Were this all Schuller had to say about the cross, his critics would be right in seeing in this interpretation the effect of the cross as “moral influence,” Jesus’ sacrifice inspiring us to emulate his example of self-giving love. To claim this as the heart of Schuller’s understanding of the atonement, however, is simply without warrant if we listen to his own statement. References to the atonement are to be found throughout the text and it is always the substitutionary atonement that comes to expression. For example:

It is not until we meet Jesus Christ, who is perfect and he offers to share his robe of righteousness with us and his garment of grace is draped across our shoulders that we can then walk with him into the presence of God.

He specifically discusses the crucifixion in another context. There he lists three ways in which we can say we are saved “by the blood of Christ.”

1. The Cross of Christ brings vitality to my dignity...I know the value of my life when I see the price God paid on the Cross to save my soul....
2. The Cross of Christ makes atonement from guilt possible because it adds integrity to the positive Gospel...In the Cross of Christ we see the harsh reality of “negativity,” “demonic human behavior,” “collectivized social evil in institutions....”
3. The Cross of Christ adds morality to divine forgiveness. ...Negativity must pay its dues. Evil must be punished. So Christ has taken the rap “for our irresponsible negative behavior.” He experienced hell—on the cross...His suffering is credited to my personal account....So God is morally able and obligated to offer forgiveness to any person who claims the credit card of Calvary’s Cross to cover the guilt of his sinful behavior.

As stated above, Schuller will always speak of the cross, and any other doctrinal truth for that matter, from the perspective of his central motif, self-esteem, because he is convinced that self-esteem affords an effective key for interpreting the gospel for our day. To say, however, that the atoning death of Jesus Christ for the sin of the world is not at the heart of that gospel in his understanding is simply not true.

The second aspect in which the cross is “the central force in the Kingdom of God” he discusses as “the cross of the Christian.” This is the cross the person graced by God through Jesus Christ voluntarily assumes as his response to that grace. What does it mean to bear one’s cross? It means to respond positively to the dream God puts in the heart of the redeemed.

Faithful to his Reformed heritage, Schuller is careful to stress that he is now speaking of the response of a grateful heart for a salvation freely given, a salvation fully accomplished and graciously applied. To experience grace is to respond out of gratitude, and that response involves commitment. Its price is self-denial—“The voluntary vicarious assumption of the Cross.”

When God’s dream is accepted, we must be prepared to pay a high price. The dream that comes from God calls us to fulfill his will by taking an active part in his kingdom. The price? A cross. The reward? A feeling of having done something beautiful for God.

It is the cross we voluntarily accept and willingly bear that distinguishes a dangerous egotism from healthy self-esteem. To pursue the dream and thereby to commit oneself to the fulfilling of God’s will as God reveals it to one is to bear the cross. There can be no success without a cross, but even here success must not be understood as “always winning and never losing.”

Rather, success is to be defined as the gift of self-esteem that God gives us as a reward for our sacrificial service in building self-esteem in others. Win

or lose: If we follow God's plan as faithfully as we can, we will feel good about ourselves. That is success! We will then be able to live with ourselves with dignity when we know deep down in our hearts that we did what God wanted us to do.

Cross bearing is no minor theme for Schuller. Self-esteem restored in a person through the encounter with Jesus Christ and the experience of God's grace becomes the dynamic of a fruitful life lived to the glory of God. If one has truly been overwhelmed by grace, redeemed by Jesus Christ, then one knows with Paul that he can do all things through Christ who strengthens him. For Schuller this is what it means to be a possibility thinker.

To be saved is to know that Christ forgives me and I now dare to believe that I am somebody and I can do something for God and for my fellow human beings.

Schuller contends that forgiveness is not simply the negation of our guilt but "a positive injection of saving and soaring faith!" Repentance follows the experience of grace. Our thinking is turned around; a whole new world presents itself and we are called to "caring, risky trust which promises the hope of glory...through noble, human need-filling achievements."

Cross bearing is costly. In many and various ways this fact comes to expression:

There is no crown without a cross. There is no success without sacrifice. There is no resurrection without death...no accomplishment without commitment, and no commitment without conflict. For there is no commitment without involvement; there is no involvement without self-denial; and there is no self-denial without personal sacrifice.

So what is the real Christ-call to self-denial? It is a willingness to be involved in the spiritual and social solutions in society.

Self-denial is the daring commitment of your name, your reputation, your integrity, your ego on the altar of God's call to service. Mark this; it is important: The greatest Cross any person can carry is to risk sacrificing his or her ego by risking the embarrassment of a public failure in the pursuit of some noble, honorable, God-inspired dream. That is positive self-denial. It is denying your ego the selfish protection from a possible humiliating failure that might occur if you tried to carry out the divine idea.

No one familiar with the ministry of Robert Schuller can doubt that he speaks here out of his own experience. Jesus followed a dream to do the Father's will and he was crucified. Martin Luther King Jr. had a dream and he was assassinated. Robert Schuller has followed a dream, and only the naive would judge the personal cost in terms of the grandeur of the Crystal Cathedral.

Cross-bearing in Schuller's understanding is a call "to do something creative and constructive." He rejects the "crusader complex." While recognizing that sometimes a situation calls for frontal attack, confrontation, he is also aware that such an approach is a dangerous style and should be the exception, not the rule, because violence breeds violence. The difference between a positive, constructive approach to society's problems and the confrontational approach is the difference

between generating a social climate of polarization versus creating a community where creative and mutually respectful dialogue can happen.

Finally, cross-bearing will move the Christian person into the whole spectrum of human society and its concerns. Schuller will not choose between a gospel of personal salvation or a social gospel. He proclaims a whole gospel that brings personal salvation to individuals and addresses the larger societal issues as well. It is Schuller's conviction that the idea of self-esteem provides an integrating factor which can show how the personal and social dimensions of theology can be interconnected. Schuller thus sees the applicability of the gospel to the full spectrum of human existence, personal and social. He sees the theology of the Reformation as reactionary and the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries as the "reactionary age." With the conviction regarding the dignity of the human person and the realization that the deepest human need and longing is for self-esteem, he is convinced a Christian theology will be able to address the whole person and the whole of society with its healing gospel ushering in a new age, the age of mission.

As we reflect on our walk with Jesus Christ through another Lenten pilgrimage we raise the question of the human condition and what address this time of self-denial makes to it. In a critique of the idea that low self-esteem is at the heart of the human dilemma, David G. Myers cites recent data from psychological research which seems to indicate that there is rather a "self-serving bias" that characterizes the human person. Myers contends,

It seems true that the most common error in people's self-images is not unrealistically low self-esteem, but rather a self-serving bias; not an inferiority complex, but a superiority complex. In any satisfactory theory or theology of self-esteem, these two truths must somehow coexist [The Christian Century, December 1, 1982, pp. 1226-1230).

If Myers is correct, it would not be the first time that truth proved dialectical. We ought not immediately be forced to choose between Schuller and Myers. Rather, it would seem that each has hold of an important and critical insight. In all of the recent research data referred to by Myers we are dealing with the human person in action—acting man or woman in concrete, existential situations. In our analysis of Schuller's position on the human person we saw that there is no dark shadow, no demonic dimension of human behavior that he denies. His

contention regarding the fundamental need of every person for self-esteem says nothing about concrete human behavior. What he does insist is that that behavior is a manifestation, not of human nature as human nature, but rather of human nature as distorted, wrenched loose from its native soil of resting in God. Once that separation of the person from God occurs, all hell breaks loose, literally, but it is reaction, not simple action as a reflection of nature.

Thus the recent research data only confirms what we in the church have always known from Scripture about ourselves: our lives are marked by rebellion, pride, and self-love in the sense of selfishness.

It is precisely here that Schuller—the pastor and communicator of the gospel — has so much to teach us. The diagnosis of the situation is dismal; will we be content simply to declare that dark truth? Can we be content to reinforce what our hearers already really know but which, if thrown in their faces, will only reinforce them in their already entrenched rebellion by which they are trying to deny the truth?

Schuller points us to an alternative which is both theologically and psychologically sound. There is no need to recite the darkness of the person's reactive behavior of which he or she is quite aware; what is needful is to show that through the creative action and intention of God, he or she is something quite other than the behavior would seem to indicate. Through an appeal to what he is, not what he does, one may just succeed in breaking through to the person because the approach will have been motivated by love, executed with grace, and grounded in truth. Defenses tumble; the cornered is known, feels no need to rush to justify himself, senses acceptance, and learns of the reality of forgiveness. Then it is that deep repentance occurs. It is not a prelude to salvation but a fruit of the experience of grace. It is in the presence of Jesus Christ in whose face is seen the good and gracious God that one knows unconditional love and acceptance; therefore it is in that presence that one dares see oneself deeply and that one "dies" to those old patterns of reactive behavior that bound him in chains of selfish existence and created havoc in his human relationships and, most seriously, alienated him from God.

If the church would really hear Robert Schuller, there would be renewal and revitalization of major proportions. One of my most respected teachers, Professor D. Ivan Dykstra, wrote in personal correspondence about Schuller's basic premise regarding the dignity of the human person and the basic need for self-worth. Commenting on Schuller's book, *Self-Esteem*:... he judges

it was Bob Schuller in search of a theology, or, better, in search of a Bible. And this is exactly the right order and the only proper order, despite our wish and our pretense that we find our Bibles first and then go on from there. All reformations, vitalizations of the faith, happen by our first responding to an instinct of authenticity and then going on to re-read our

Bibles accordingly or creating our theologies....The great prophets did it that way, Jesus did, Luther, and so on down the line.

Dykstra then goes on to reflect on his own philosophical work which led him to an examination of Christian beliefs through use of linguistic analysis. He raises the question, are our Christian beliefs Christian? His conclusion is

That religious terms, including Christian ones, begin always in the form of some great, situationally defined, instinctive authenticities. After the first flush of excitement...there is a time of intellectual and institutional structuring of the belief. There is a virtually complete discontinuity of meaning between the universe of discourse of the original intuition and the institutionalized universe of discourse into which we move the original terms. In the process the whole original meaning is simply buried. In Christian contexts, the over-all name for that structuring is "ecclesiasticizing." And everything, every dominating concept in the ecclesiastico-theological structure, loses the authentic Biblical meaning: faith, sin, Jesus, inspiration, scripture, resurrection have no longer any discernible connection with the initial biblical intent. Until some courageous soul, (like Luther, as one example) has, and has the courage to act on, a new authentic instinct. To attack the ecclesiastical inauthenticities one does not need to attack the Bible on which they base themselves; one needs only to "out-Bible" the bibliolaters. To read the Bible via the instincts is not to invent a new Bible; it is to recover it.

Dykstra suggests that Schuller's authentic instinctual grasp of a deep biblical truth has ramifications for the whole theological system; that perhaps Schuller's unquestioned Reformed orthodoxy is itself too confined a vehicle to contain the ferment of his own insight. Such is certainly the case, but Schuller did not write this slender volume as the complete and final word. He writes a first word pleading with others to join the question for a more adequate way to bring to expression his own authentic insight confirmed by the worldwide hearing he has gained.