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Self-Esteem: The New Confusion

A Critical Assessment of Schuller's "New Reformation"

by David F. Wells

Self-Esteem: The New Reformation
by Robert Schuller (Word, 1982, 177 pp., $8.95).

We are in the midst of cultural revolution. The old understandings which large numbers of people assigned to life have gone. In their place have come new understandings. What it meant three decades ago to be a homosexual, to be an unmarried woman, to own a Cadillac or to grow a beard mean completely different things now. That, at least, is the thesis of Daniel Yankelovich in his book, *New Rules in American Life: Searching for Self-Fulfillment in a World Turned Upside Down.*

This revolution, he believes, began in the 1960s. It was largely confined to the young and the search for new values which was at its heart was concealed by the fact that on the surface its expression usually took the form of opposition to the Vietnam War. That search has now spread nationwide and when the War ended, its real nature began to emerge. It is a search for self. It is a search for ways to fulfill the self. In the present context this has produced an emancipation from traditional roles for women, a rebellion against traditional sexual mores, a disillusionment with and rejection of the value of work but, at the same time, a recognition of the importance of an affluent way of life for one's self-fulfillment.

This search is full of paradoxes. People, for example, who are most dedicated to self-fulfillment are also most prone to loneliness, for the very thing which is desired—the fulfillment of the self—is pursued in such a way as to make meaningful relations with other self-seeking people rather difficult. Again, work is disparaged and the percentage of those for whom it holds an important place in their lives has plummeted. At the same time, it is widely believed—following Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers—that unless we have the affluence to resolve "lower order needs" such as food and transportation we will never be free to pursue the fulfillment of the "higher order needs" of the self. Thus has a conception of inner development been married to a psychology of affluence, the latter being seen a precondition for the realization of the former.

These, though, are not the only snags along the road. Ours is a society whose organization is changing dramatically. In the twentieth century, more and more people have moved into the cities. Indeed, by the year 2000 it is predicted that 94% of our population will be living in cities. Cities create their own environments, psychologically and culturally. They are places of great pluralism, where life-styles and worldviews jostle each other incessantly. These great soulless megastructures are also places of great loneliness. Psychological studies typically show that those who live in the city have a small circle of friends whom they treat personally and everyone else they treat impersonally. Humanness is a frequent casualty in the process. The urban style of thought and the relationships which the city virtually disallows, as Peter Berger and Jacques Ellul have argued, makes it almost impossible to find and express the full range of our humanity. Our modern forms of social organization pit themselves against human fulfillment.

Our natural reaction, however, is not to abandon our search for self-fulfillment but to abandon our hope of finding much help outside ourselves. This is a theme John Naisbitt has identified in his *Megatrends: Ten New Directions Transforming Our Lives.* In the 1970s, he says, Americans began to disengage from the entire range of external institutions and to look within themselves. Many people, for example, ceased being passive about their health and began to doubt the infallibility of their medical practitioners. Taking matters into their own hands they began exercising, dieting, and eating healthier foods. Alternatives to the local school systems about which many parents felt concern began to spring up. In the business world, small entrepreneurial businesses replaced the traditional dependence on the large corporations. And self-help organizations emerged for those interested in gardening to those concerned about crime.

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This, I believe, is the larger context in which we need to understand the religious expression of the self movement. It was formulated earlier in books such as Cecil Osborne's *The Art of Learning to Love Yourself* and Bryan Jay Cannon's *Celebrate Yourself.* In a slightly different key it has again come into view in Robert Schuller's *Self-Esteem: The New Reformation* of which 250,000 copies were scattered to the four winds through the beneficent intervention of a financial angel.

Schuller's book will be an instant hit. This is so, first, because our culture is now in headlong pursuit of the self and, second, because the self has proved extremely elusive. It seems to take a sadistic pleasure in denying to its most ardent pursuers the gratification of finding it. And in our modern world, with its destruction of older forms of relationship and of traditional mores, the dignity and worth of the individual has more or less vanished. Many people struggle to secure their own self-worth let alone succeed in fulfilling themselves. That being the case, Schuller's book promises to show the way to the future, to offer a balm for our wounds. At least, that is what I suspect many will imagine.

Self-Esteem is the attempt at rewriting the meaning of Christianity in the light of the widespread concern in our culture with the self. Its thesis is simple. Self-esteem, or the capacity to feel good about ourselves, is an "inherited right."[1] We begin life, however, with a negative self-image[2]—Schuller's definition of original sin—which necessitates repentance. Repentance is the rejection of our feeling of nonworth.[3] Salvation, then, is the process of changing our negative self-image into a positive one.[4] And the Christian life therefore becomes an "ego-trip" which is divinely sanctioned.[5]

Schuller's argument is developed aggressively and controversially. He believes that traditional Christian theology had led us down the garden path in two main ways. First, it has attempted to make us God-centered and that, Schuller counters, means that we are necessarily denied any legitimate concern about things human. Second, the traditional doctrine of sin defined as rebellion against God, his Christ and his Word is, Schuller claims, demeaning to human beings and an assault on their dignity.[6] Consequently, Schuller sets out to turn traditional teaching on its head. Pride, he declares, is not a vice but a virtue! Humility and its sought-for God-centeredness are injurious to human well-being! No, God's purpose is that we might take his place in the world[7] and that we be glorified through what he has done.[8]

That Schuller is for self-esteem is innocent enough. We all ought to be for it! Christ died in our stead, not merely that we might be forgiven, but also that we might find through him our real purpose as those who are at the summit of creation. It is therefore unfortunate that so often concern for what is human has been co-opted by humanists whose philosophy will never produce the results it seeks. Christians are, in a sense, the real humanists because only in Christ is the fulness and meaning of our humanity recovered. To the extent to which Schuller has seen this, he has seen something that is essentially right. The problem, however, is that he has confused the end with the means. Self-esteem results from Christian salvation but it is not to be confused with it. Nurturing self-esteem is not the same thing as preaching the gospel. Schuller, however, consistently confuses these matters. He advocates his kind of gospel as if it were an expression of evangelical belief. It is, therefore, worth pondering further. We will consider it from three different angles: the *historical,* the *psychological,* and the *theological.*

1. Robert Schuller, *Self-Esteem: The New Reformation* (Word, 1982), p. 38.
2. Schuller, p. 37.
3. Schuller, p. 103.
4. Schuller, p. 68.
5. Schuller, p. 74.
6. Schuller, p. 65.
7. Schuller, p. 102.
8. Schuller, p. 99.

History Repeats Itself

It is ironical that a book emanating from one of our evangelical superstars should so unknowingly ring the changes on that kind of Protestant Liberalism that was so throughly discredited a generation ago. But that is what Schuller has done. Like Harnack and the earlier Liberals he believes that Christianity is about the fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of man and the infinite value of the soul; that is the framework which, almost *verbatim,* he imposes on the Lord's prayer in order to find its "real" meaning. And then there is absorption in the self. It is remarkable to compare Schuller's book with Henry Emerson Fosdick's *On Being a Real Person.* Each is captivated by the untapped potential of the person; each denies sin as rebellion and lawlessness; each plays with the language of the self,

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imagining that theology is, in the process, being done. And common to each is a humanism which is happily owned. One recalls Richard Niebuhr's scathing denunciation of the Liberals' gospel: "a God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross." This needs to be changed very little in order to describe Schuller's thought: a God of "nonjudgmental love" brings people who simply think badly of themselves into a kingdom of human inspiration through a Christ who is not a sacrifice for sin but merely an Ideal of self-giving.

Psychology Demurs

Psychology does not seem a likely quarry for those seeking reasons to be cautious about Schuller's novelties. Since Schuller has surrendered theology to the authority of psychology it might seem that he can at least take shelter from those who wield psychological data and arguments. Not so! Many psychologists do not share Schuller's naive belief that the esteeming of the self can easily be distinguished from crude self-centeredness; as a matter of fact, they go together more often than we would care to know.

David Myers has summarized this evidence in a striking article in which he, too, has remarked on how strange it is to find Christian preachers parading their ideas in the language of humanistic psychology.[9] What psychological experimenters are finding is that there is a deep, pervasive bias of self-serving that undergirds human experience. Experimenters have found, for example, that people consistently claim credit for success but blame their failures on others. Not only so, but most people esteem themselves "above average." Of nearly a million high school seniors surveyed, 70% rated their leadership ability as "above average" and only 2% as below. In terms of getting along with others, zero rated themselves below average and 25% saw themselves in the top 1%! Self-justification, researchers have also found, is epidemic and the belief in personal infallibility is widespread. People consistently believe they will act in ways that are far more acceptable than the norm and most people are unrealistically optimistic about their own lives. Research has discovered an active sieving process at work in people which leads them to remember the good, pleasant experiences and to forget the bad, painful ones. Research would no doubt also show this tendency being reinforced in Schuller's audience. The presence of this Pollyana complex is the very premise of his "possibility thinking" and his constant exhortations to "feel good about ourselves." This is self-love, which is the essence of sin and which psychological research is now uncovering, is the foundation on which Schuller rests his thought. But far from revealing that this foundation is of rock, recent research has exhibited its sandy character.

Theology Is Surrendered

Schuller's disenchantment with theology arises from the fact that he sees the God of traditional orthodoxy to be a threat to his own religious interests. He is, of course, correct. It is, however, most unfortunate that Schuller has defined his position in terms that are frankly humanistic. Schuller is skiing happily down the slope which leads to the displacement of the divine by the human.

Schuller's mistake is that he has sought to recast Christian faith in psychological terms. The truth of the matter, however, is that the biblical understanding of sin as lawlessness, rebellion and wickedness, as self-love, pride and corruption simply cannot be translated in terms of self-image. Undoubtedly poor self-image results from sin but sin is not essentially poor self-image. The "vertical dimension" in sin, about which most psychologists say very little because of a dominant humanistic bias, is also something about which Schuller is largely silent.

In actual fact, what gives people their value is not, as Schuller claims, the "inherited right" of self-esteem. When Scripture addresses this question it relates human worth to the presence of the *imago Dei.* Murder is forbidden because we are all made in God's image (Gen. 9:6); indeed, it is for this reason that we are taught we should not even abuse one another verbally (Jas. 3:9). This image may be considered from two angles. It is, in its formal structure, the ability to reason, make moral judgments, sustain relationships and echo the creative work of God. In its substance, it is the ability to do all of these things in ways that reflect the goodness and holiness of God. The fall destroyed the image in terms of its substance but not in terms of its structure. Those who are now Christ's are being transformed by the Spirit of God such that their thoughts, judgments, actions, relationships and work will increasingly reflect the holiness of God through an image in process of moral restoration (Col. 3:10; Eph. 4:20). It is God's purpose first to produce holy people; it is Schuller's to produce emotionally whole people. It is one of God's great paradoxes that the former usually leads to the latter but the latter, when pursued by itself, seldom leads to the former.

This is because self-love and self-esteem can be considered in ways that sound similar but actually are diametrically opposed. We can, on the one hand, esteem ourselves highly because we consider ourselves worth esteeming. We can tell ourselves that we must be rather special if God takes so much note of us and even went to the trouble of dying for us. To congratulate ourselves on our importance therefore becomes the first step, we might say to ourselves, in developing a positive self-image. It is also the first step into auto-eroticism. On the other hand, we can love ourselves in the sense of recognizing the presence of the *imago Dei* and believe that it is God's self-sacrificing love on the Cross which gives us standing in his sight, not our sense of self-importance. This means that we will recognize sin as being, not an assault on our self-dignity, but an assault on the way God desires us to be. We will deny it as a precondition of affirming our relationship to Christ. "Then," says John Stott, "when we deny our false self in Adam and affirm our true self in Christ, we find that we are free not to love ourselves, but rather to love him who has redeemed us, and our neighbors for his sake. At that point we reach the ultimate paradox of Christian living that when we lose ourselves in the selfless loving of God and neighbor we find ourselves (Mk. 8:35). True self-denial leads to true self-discovery."[10]

True self-denial leads to true self-discovery. True self-discovery is finding self, not in terms of the self-movement of our culture, but in terms of God's revelation and the life and death of his Son. And such a discovery is also the discovery of what it means to be human as God intended us to be, how we can become whole people precisely and only because he is making us holy people. There is no shortcut in all of this. Prescriptions for quick fixes of possibility thinking, of hyped-up self-esteeming, of self-serving puffery, barely even qualify as the proverbial bandaid for the gaping wound.

Schuller offers an echo, not a choice. His message is resonating with the assumptions that make our culture humanistic. He offers us merely a religious form of what can be had under strictly humanistic auspices. His is a gospel of disguised humanism, all tricked out in psychological jargon and ticker-tape excitement. It panders to the very pride and self-sufficiency which the biblical gospel destroys. And that, of course, is the difference between God's wisdom and ours.

9. David Myers, "The Inflated Self," *Christian Century* (December 1, 1982) p. 1226.
10. John Stott, "Must I really love myself?" *Christianity Today* 22/15 (May 5, 1978) p. 35.