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So Much for Possibility Thinking

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Bad news must be especially hard to bear when you build your world on positive thinking, but the news out of Garden Grove this past Sunday was not happy. Robert H. Schuller, founder of the Crystal Cathedral and the “Hour of Power” television ministry, announced that he had removed his son, Robert A. Schuller, as host of the television ministry.



“It is no secret to any of you that my son, Robert, and I have been struggling as we each have different ideas as to the direction and the vision for this ministry as we move into the future,” the elder Schuller stated in a [statement](#) published on the church’s Web site. “For this lack of shared vision and the jeopardy in which this is placing this entire ministry, it has become necessary for Robert and me to part ways in the Hour of Power television ministry to each pursue our own unique God-ordained visions.”

When the father said that the rift with his son was “no secret,” he was presumably referring to the fact that the son had been strangely absent from the broadcast as its main preacher. In 2006, the elder Schuller had announced that Robert A. Schuller would take over as senior pastor of the Crystal Cathedral and as main preacher for the television program. “I am not retiring,” the father had said, but he was leaving the main role of preacher to his son.

As [The Los Angeles Times](#) reported Sunday:

Robert A. Schuller, known to congregants as Robert II, had been groomed to take over for his father since 1996.

He had followed in his father’s footsteps almost exactly, attending the same college, Hope College in Holland, Mich. He also founded his own Orange County church, in San Juan Capistrano, before coming to the Crystal Cathedral seven years ago.

Like his father, he also writes religious books — 13 at last count, according to the church’s website. In recent months, however, the younger Schuller had disappeared from the television program, replaced by reruns featuring his father.

In his announcement Sunday, Robert H. Schuller went on to say that he would host the television program, but that guest preachers drawn from speakers at his “Institute for Successful Church Leadership” would fill the pulpit: “No longer will the Hour of Power be the voice and face of just one or two individuals. We are now going to continue to embrace and celebrate the best of the best by inviting them to share our pulpit with us.”

The church stated that the younger Schuller would continue as senior pastor of the church, but no duties were specified.

On Monday the [paper reported](#): “The schism between the Rev. Robert H. Schuller and his son at Orange County’s Crystal Cathedral arose over a disagreement about broadening the church’s long-running television show, “Hour of Power,” beyond a single personality — a move opposed by the younger Schuller, pastors involved in the matter said Sunday.”

But here is the really interesting part of the report:

Schuller built his worldwide ministry over a half century on the psychology of positive thinking and appealing to people turned off by the formality of traditional faiths. In contrast, his son's sermons have been full of direct references to the Bible.

"I was called to start a mission, not a church," Schuller told his audience Sunday. "There is a difference. . . . You don't try to preach . . . what is sin and what isn't sin. A mission is a place where you ask nonbelievers to come and find faith and hope and feel love. We're a mission first, a church second."

These comments indicate something beyond a disagreement over having multiple preachers on the television program. Was the younger Schuller ousted because he was preaching sermons the father considered to be *too biblical* in content?

In the elder Schuller's view, preaching "what is sin and isn't sin" is out of bounds for his television program. He explicitly identified the Crystal Cathedral as a "mission" first and then a church, with preaching about sin evidently out of bounds for a "mission."

As the paper explains: *Asked whether his son wanted to turn the Crystal Cathedral into a church rather than a mission, Schuller declined to answer, then said, "But I think it is a wise question."*

In 1982 the elder Schuller published a ministry manifesto known as *Self-Esteem: The New Reformation*. In that book, mailed free to thousands of pastors, Schuller argued that the evangelical church had lost sight of the true message of the Gospel — a message of self-esteem. He castigated expository biblical preaching and called for a therapeutic gospel.

He wrote:

Today the sincere, Christian believer is a minority. So the church must be willing to die as a church and be born again as a mission. We cannot speak out with a "Thus saith the Lord" strategy when we are talking to people who couldn't care less about the Lord. We cannot start with "What does the text say?" if we're talking to persons who aren't about to affirm respect for or unquestioning obedience to "the text."

The main thrust of the book was a call for a "new Reformation" that would replace the Gospel as preached by the churches with a new message of self-esteem to be preached by "missions" for God. Along the way, Schuller redefined both sin and salvation, abandoning biblical definitions for those he found in positive thinking, modern secular psychology, and the New Thought tradition.

But in that fascinating passage above, we see the seeds of the statements the father made to the congregation on Sunday. A look at the younger Schuller's sermons posted at the church's Web site reveals nothing even resembling what most evangelicals would consider expository biblical preaching. But the Bible is cited, and with the direct implication and instruction that we are to learn from it.

Even so, that preaching must have crossed a line.

Any conflict between a father and son is tragic. A public conflict is all the more tragic and painful. The congregation at the Crystal Cathedral must have felt the pain. Any father or son reading the reports feels the pain. What about the younger Schuller's self-esteem? The gospel of self-esteem is a false gospel that, like every other false gospel, breaks down under pressure.

That's why we so desperately need the real Gospel — the Gospel of Christ. This is also why we need the church. Possibility thinking obviously has its limits. Those limits came into public view this past Sunday. Did anyone there notice?

