

The Gospel According to Rick Warren

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No one has exemplified the market-driven approach better than Rick Warren, pastor of the huge Saddleback Church in southern California and author of *The Purpose-Driven Church* and *The Purpose-Driven Life*. While Warren is open and up-front about his philosophy, strategy and methods, nevertheless things are not always as they appear. For example, “purpose-driven” sounds better than “market-driven” but it is basically the same thing. In his book *The Purpose-Driven Life*, his opening statement is, “It is not about you,” then turns around and writes a whole book about “you.” He belittles pop-psychology then repeatedly promotes it by simply calling it something else. He publicly cuts ties with Robert Schuller, then regurgitates some of the most odious things that Schuller has been teaching for thirty years. He claims commitment to the Scriptures then undermines them at almost every turn. He will tell his followers that he is not tampering with the message but only reengineering the methods, when in fact he has so altered the message as to make it all but unrecognizable.

This brings us to his most disturbing alteration, the gospel itself. To charge Warren with modification of the gospel is an ugly accusation, one that should not be made lightly. What is the evidence for such an indictment? Consider the following:

In the video that accompanies the “40 Days of Purpose,” Warren leads his listeners in prayer at the end of the first session. The prayer goes like this:

"Dear God, I want to know your purpose for my life. I don't want to base the rest of my life on wrong things. I want to take the first step in preparing for eternity by getting to know you. Jesus Christ, I don't understand how but as much as I know how I want to open up my life to you. Make yourself real to me. And use this series in my life to help me know what you made me for."
Warren goes on to say: *"Now if you've just prayed that prayer for the very first time I want to congratulate you. You've just become a part of the family of God."*

Warren would be hard-pressed to find biblical backing for this presentation of the gospel. We find nothing here about sin, grace, repentance, the person of Christ, Calvary, faith, judgment, or the resurrection. This is the ultimate in a mutilated, seeker-sensitive gospel: the seeker comes to Christ in order to find his purpose in life, not to receive forgiveness from sin and the righteousness of God. Then, to pronounce someone a full-fledged member of the family of God because he has prayed such a prayer (based on minimal, if any, understanding of the person and work of Christ), is beyond tragic.

Does Warren do any better in his book, *The Purpose-Driven Life*? A little, but not much. Concerning eternity he tells his readers, “If you learn to love and trust God’s Son, Jesus, you will be invited to spend the rest of eternity with him. On the other hand, if you reject his life, forgiveness, and salvation, you will spend eternity apart forever” (p. 37). There is just enough truth here to be confusing, but the New Testament never tells us to learn to love and trust Christ in order to be saved. We are told to repent (Acts 17:30) and place our faith in Christ (Ephesians

2:8-9), not “learn to love and trust.” Just how does the unbeliever go about learning to love and trust Jesus? These are fruits of regeneration, not means to regeneration.

On page 58 Warren gives perhaps his most complete gospel presentation found in *The Purpose-Driven Life*. There he tells his readers that they must first believe God loves them and has chosen them to have a relationship with his Son who died on the cross for them. Warren writes, “Real life begins by committing yourself completely to Jesus Christ.” I would not argue with that, but how are we to commit ourselves to Christ? Warren states, “Right now, God is inviting you to live for his glory by fulfilling the purposes he made you for... all you need to do is receive and believe.... Will you accept God’s offer?” Then he again offers a sample prayer, “I invite you to bow your head and quietly whisper the prayer that will change your eternity, ‘Jesus, I believe in you and I receive you.’” He then promises, “If you sincerely meant that prayer, congratulations! Welcome to the family of God! You are now ready to discover and start living God’s purpose for your life.” It is worth noting that this gospel presentation is found on Day 7 (of the 40-day journey). We are to assume that the content of Days 1-6 have led up to this invitation to receive Christ. What Warren believes a sinner needs to know to become part of the family of God has presumably been presented in the first week of the journey. But Warren has said nothing about who Jesus is, why He died on the cross, in what manner He is their Savior, the cleansing power of the blood of Christ, repentance or confession of sin, the consequences of sin, or again, the resurrection of Christ. In a biblically illiterate, post-Christian era, it cannot be assumed that the unbeliever has any concept of any of these things. This is especially disturbing in light of Warren’s central message: find God and you will find yourself (purpose). When this is undeniably the thesis of *The Purpose-Driven Life*, and the “Forty Days of Purpose” campaign, the unbeliever would naturally conclude that he is praying a prayer that will enable him to solve the problem of lack of purpose in his life. Where in the Scriptures is the gospel ever presented as Warren presents it? We are hopeful that Warren does not personally deny any of the essential elements of the gospel, but he certainly does not give them proper weight and he leaves much to the imagination of his readers.

John MacArthur is on target when he writes, “Listening to a seeker-sensitive evangelical preacher today, we’re likely to think it’s easy to be a Christian. Just say these little words, pray this little prayer, and poof! you’re in the club.” [i] Admittedly, salvation is received by faith alone in Christ alone, but it is not received by mouthing a little prayer lacking in biblical content and understanding, with the hopes that you will find purpose in life. As a matter of fact, one evangelical leader is reported to have entitled a sermon in response to the seeker-sensitive gospel, “How to Fill Your Church with Tares.”

MacArthur warns, “People are breezing through those wide, comfortable, inviting gates with all their baggage, their self-needs, their self-esteem, and their desire for fulfillment and self-satisfaction. And the most horrible thing about it is they think they’re going to heaven.” [ii]

Ladies Home Journal

Warren’s popularity with the masses has risen to such levels that he has now been asked to write a monthly column for the *Ladies Home Journal*. While some may question why a secular magazine would be interested in what an evangelical pastor has to say, certainly we can rejoice

that Warren has been handed a worldwide forum (readership estimated at 14.5 million) in which to proclaim God's truth, including the gospel, to a largely unbelieving audience. What a privilege. He has been given a platform from which he can herald the excellencies of Christ. But, unfortunately, Warren has not done that. Rather than preach Christ, Warren's message, as reflected in the title of his article is, "Learn to Love Yourself." In his March, 2005 article the man who opened his book with the words, "It's not about you," shows that he really thinks it is. He tells his readership, "To truly love yourself, you need to know the five truths that form the basis of a healthy self-image." What are they? (All the following are direct quotes from Warren's article)

Accept Yourself

God accepts us unconditionally, and in his view we are all precious and priceless. Focus on this and you will not waste any time and effort trying to be someone you're not.

Love Yourself

[Warren's wife affirms], "God really does love me without strings attached." [On this basis we apparently have been given the freedom to love ourselves]

Be True To Yourself

Discover, accept and enjoy our unique "shape" [which refers to Warren's S.H.A.P.E. program] ...Be content with them [our weaknesses].

Forgive Yourself

God doesn't expect perfection but He does insist on honesty. When I honestly admit my errors and ask forgiveness in faith, He doesn't hold a grudge, doesn't get even, and doesn't bring it up again. We should practice such a forgiving attitude with ourselves.

Believe in Yourself

Start affirming the truth about yourself! The truth is God has created you with talents, abilities, personality and background in a combination that is uniquely you. It's your choice. You can believe what others say about you, or you can believe in yourself as God does, who says you are truly acceptable, lovable, valuable and capable.

What a disappointment! Not only does Warren not share the gospel, the glory of Christ or any theological truth, he muddies the waters by offering anemic pop-psychology none of which is supportable from Scripture. Briefly, remember that Warren is not writing to believers but to the general populace, which he would have to assume is largely unsaved. With that in mind consider:

- To this audience he tells them that God accepts them unconditionally. Nothing could be further from the truth. We are unacceptable to God in our natural state.

It would take the death of the Son of God to provide the means whereby we could be accepted by God and only those who are in Christ are acceptable to the Father (Ephesians 1:3-14).

- Nowhere in Scripture are we ever told to love ourselves. We are told to love God with all of our heart, soul and mind. We are also told to love others as we love ourselves (Matthew 22:37-40). Some jump on this phrase, “as yourself,” as proof that God commands us to love ourselves. That is not true. The Scriptures tell us we already love ourselves (Ephesians 5:28-29); we do not need to be encouraged to an inordinate self-love that amounts to self-centeredness. As a matter of fact, the only passage in the New Testament that actually speaks of self-love considers it a sinful sign of the last days (2 Timothy 3:2). Christ calls us to deny self (Luke 9:23) not love self.
- To tell the unbeliever to accept and be true to himself is to condemn him eternally. Should one who is dead in his trespasses and sins (Ephesians 2:1) be told to be content with his weaknesses? Warren may be attempting to soothe the troubled hearts of his readers, but he is not pointing them to the Savior.
- Not a word can be found in Scripture about forgiving ourselves. This is a modern psychological invention, not a biblical principle. God calls us to confess our sins to Him and He will forgive us (1 John 1:9). We lack the ability and authority to forgive ourselves; that is God’s prerogative.
- Rather than believe in self we are told to “believe on the Lord Jesus” (Acts 16:31). Rather than believe in self Paul confirmed that we are inadequate in ourselves (2 Corinthians 3:5), being mere earthen vessels (2 Corinthians 4:7). Rather than believe in self we are told that anything we accomplish is through God’s strength (Philippians 4:13). Rather than believe in self Paul said that he “boasted in his weaknesses, that the power of God may dwell in me” (2 Corinthians 12:9).

How can this evangelical pastor, who has emerged as the most recognized Protestant leader in the world, one who is looked to for spiritual insight and guidance by millions, miss the mark so widely? Perhaps the key is in his view of doctrine. In *The Purpose Driven Life* Warren wants us to have no doubt that, when we stand before the Lord, “God won’t ask about your religious background or doctrinal views. The only thing that will matter is, did you accept what Jesus did for you and did you learn to love and trust him” (p. 34)? On the contrary, what we believe is of utmost importance. Did the Holy Spirit inspire the Bible for us to ignore what it teaches? Are the words of Jesus insignificant? Are the doctrinal truths of the New Testament epistles nothing more than filler? Concerning salvation, it does matter what you believe about Jesus, the cross, the resurrection, sin, judgment, the gospel and so forth. Warren is doing a great disservice to the church of God. **As he minimizes the content of the gospel, trivializes Scripture, belittles doctrine and replaces them with psychology, mysticism and worldly wisdom we are reminded of Paul’s warning in Colossians 2:8, “See to it that no one takes you captive**

through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ.”

An Alternative to Warren’s Methods and Message

My wife and I recently attended that worship service of an evangelical church which has adopted the purpose-driven model popularized by Warren. The service was disturbing on a number of fronts, including irreverent worship, unbiblical musical selections and a general attitude of apathy. But what was most troubling was the sermon. The pastor, surely a well-meaning and sincere servant of God, had no clue how to exegete the Scriptures. In his topical message he pointed the congregation, by means of PowerPoint slides, to dozens of passages. But in astounding fashion he managed to misinterpret, either through spiritualizing, missing the context, reading a poor translation, etc., every single passage. Not once did he provide the correct interpretation of any verse of Scripture, yet as far as I could observe no one seemed to notice or care. This provided for me further insight into what I have been suspecting and observing. Warren’s philosophy of ministry, misuse of Scripture, weak gospel message, infiltration of psychology and disregard for theology is being embraced by evangelicalism because that is where much of evangelicalism is already residing. Warren is not so much an initiator as he is a product of his time. I believe he has caught the wave of what was already happening in evangelicalism. What he has done successfully is connect the dots – develop methods, programs and a message that seems to work. Pragmatism has become the final arbitrator in our society and increasingly in our churches. “If it works it must be of God,” so goes the common wisdom. But pragmatism is an unreliable trailblazer. In our more reflective moments few of us are willing to believe that success can always have the final word. For example, Mormonism is the most successful “church” in the world today. Yet, none of us is willing to believe that God is blessing the Mormon Church. If pragmatism is our guide, we will be hopelessly tossed about by every wind of doctrine (Eph 4:14). We need something more stable – a true foundation.

Back to the Bible

I Timothy 3:15 describes the mission of the church as being the pillar and support of the truth. Whatever else the church does, it must take this commission from God seriously. No one but God’s church is interested in such a project – it falls on God’s people, the true church, to be the one place where truth is believed, upheld, and gloriously proclaimed. Of course, the truth that the church has to offer has a source – the Word of God. All the church does must emerge from the Scriptures. Every method, program, evangelistic effort, and message the church declares must find its roots firmly planted in biblical truth.

This leads us to Warren’s, and his imitators’, Achilles’ heel: Warren does not begin with the Bible. At first glance “The Purpose-driven” programs and message are quite attractive. They seem to speak the language of the people; they are successful; they are saturated with Scripture, much of its teaching is on the mark, and many promoting and involved in *The Purpose-driven Life* are sincere and well-meaning. But upon close examination there is a fly in the soup. It is no ordinary fly either – it is a huge, quarter-pounder filled with deadly poison. We can attempt to ignore the fly, hoping all will be well, but ultimately we must either deal with the fly or allow it to alter our soup to something altogether different.

What is the fly? It is this – Warren does not begin with Scripture, he begins with people. His church was started on the basis of a survey asking people what they wanted in a church. He quizzes the congregation on the kind of secular music they like and provides that kind of music. He starts with the felt-needs of people and then crafts a message to meet those needs. He determines what he believes people need to hear and then goes to Scripture to find support for his philosophy of ministry.

It is right here that we need to step back and carefully examine the Purpose-driven philosophy. I have found if you skip the foundation undergirding any system that the superstructure can appear beautiful – for a time. Again take Mormonism. Its outward emphasis on family values and morals is certainly winsome. It is its foundation which is faulty. By the same token we need to examine *The Purpose-driven Life's* foundation. Has it been laid after careful study of the Scriptures? Or are its building blocks made of secular fads, philosophies and pragmatism, mortared together with careless use of Scripture? If the latter is your conclusion, as it is mine, what are we to do?

Believe it or not, there is an alternative to PDL and other such programs. It sounds simplistic and old fashioned but it has God's stamp of approval. It is a return to the Bible. Our pulpits need to return to the unabashed exposition of Scripture. Our Sunday school classes and Bible studies need to toss the manuals and guides written about the Bible and open the Bible itself. In our local church we have dropped all commercial Sunday school curriculum -- which has been watered down to the point of uselessness – and simply teach the Bible. Our 4-5 years old are being taught selected biblical stories. Ages 6-7 will go through the Bible from Genesis to Revelation in those 2 years. Ages 8-9 will go through the Bible yet again. Ages 10-11 are being taught hermeneutics and Bible study methods and applying those methods to the study of the epistles. Ages 12-13 are taught Bible-college-level courses on systematic theology. High schoolers are taught straight Scripture with emphasis on biblical discernment. At this level many of them begin to teach children as well as their peers. All adult courses are focused on the study of Scripture, along with classes on church history, theology, and biblical living. All sermons are verse-by-verse expositions of the Word. Certainly our teachers use commentaries and Bible study aids but it is the Scriptures themselves that are studied.

I have found an amazing thing – when people are fed a steady diet of biblical truth they have little craving for cotton candy fads. Why would anyone trade in the fountain of life for cisterns that can hold no water (Jeremiah 2:13)? Of course many have and do, but the solution is not to crawl into the cistern, it is to showcase the fountain.

But this “return to the Bible” approach has one fatal problem – we are in the midst of a crisis of confidence in the sufficiency and authority of Scripture. If we do not believe that God's Word is sufficient, then we will not showcase it. If we do not believe in the final authority of the Word then we will look for alternatives. What the church and the world need today are men and women of God who believe with all of their hearts in the sufficiency of His Word. We need a church that is not ashamed of Christ “and His Word” (Luke 9:26); and who will boldly proclaim it from the housetops. It is reported that Charles Spurgeon once said, “There is no need for you

to defend a lion when he's being attacked. All you need to do is open the gate and let him out.”
With Spurgeon I believe it is time to once again open the gate and let the Word do its work.

[i]John MacArthur, *Hard to Believe*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2003), p. 12.

[ii] *Ibid.*, p. 13.

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http://www.svchapel.org/Resources/Articles/read_articles.asp?ID=112