

A Review and Response to Rick Warren's "Purpose Driven Life"
March 9, 2005

Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life* (Zondervan, 2002): 334 pp.

I. Introduction: The *PDL* Phenomenon.

This book has been a publishing and marketing phenomenon. It has been on the *New York Times* bestseller list for weeks and remains in the top ten, three years after the book's release in 2002.

Warren is a Southern Baptist who, after graduating from Southwestern Seminary in 1979, did a demographic study of where would be best to plant a church. He decided on the Saddleback Valley of Orange County, California and set off with all his belongings. When he arrived he did a demographic study of the area and profiled the typical "unchurched" person he would like to reach (a typical Orange County baby boomer [born c. 1940-60]: "Saddleback Sam"). He chose a musical style reflecting the preferences of local radio choices (light contemporary pop rock).

Warren was a pioneer in what was known as the "seeker-sensitive" movement along with Bill Hybels of Willow Creek Church in suburban Chicago. The idea was that the way to reach unchurched people was to study their needs and fit the ministry of the church to meet their needs without compromising the message (the subtitle of Warren's 1995 *The Purpose Driven Church* is "Growth Without Compromising Your Message and Mission").

His Saddleback Church exploded in growth, attracting thousands and recording thousands of conversions and is now an established meg-church.

In many ways, *Purpose Driven Life* is an individualized version of *Purpose Driven Church* where the five principles were applied corporately.

Now *PDL* has become a phenomenon. It has sold millions, been read by President Bush, Karl Rove, and Karen Hughes and is recommended reading in the corporate world.

It is, in my opinion, no accident that *PDL* has been such a hit. Warren is a master marketer. He knows how to evaluate the needs not just of Southern Californians but of Americans in general.

II. Content of the book.

The book is cast as a *40-day spiritual journey* (p. 9). Readers are asked to make an up front commitment and to read the book with a small discussion group.

Days 1-7 are the introduction and raise the questions of the purpose for human existence: “What on earth am I here for?”

The book then proceeds to present five purposes:

1. You Were Planned for God’s Pleasure (Days 8-14): Worship.
2. You Were Formed for God’s Family (Days 15-21): Fellowship.
3. You Were Created to Become Like Christ (Days 22-28): Discipleship.
4. You Were Shaped for Serving God (Days 29-35): Ministry.

Here he uses the acronym SHAPE:

S-Spiritual Gifts
 H-Heart (Passion)
 Abilities-(Natural gifts)
 P-Personality
 E-Experience

5. You Were Made for a Mission (Days 36-40): Evangelism

In *PDChurch*, Warren wrote about 5 dimensions of church growth (p. 49):

Churches grow warmer through *fellowship*, deeper through *discipleship*, stronger through *worship*, broader through *ministry*, and larger through *evangelism*.

III. Things to be praised:

- Warren repeatedly talks about having a God-centered life (“It’s not about you” [p. 17]).
- He challenged modern American materialism, narcissism and self-centered-ness and encourages his readers to live for God and to live for others.
- The five purposes are sound Biblical concepts: worship, fellowship, discipleship, ministry, and evangelism are all key.
- I especially liked the section on the importance of the church:

He stresses the importance of committed participation in a local body of believers. He rightly stresses that being a church member is like being a body part. He also stresses how important it is for members to attend meetings and spend time together.

“Following Christ includes belonging, not just believing” (p. 131).

“If an organ is somehow severed from its body, it will shrivel and die” (p. 131).

“...the first symptom of spiritual decline is usually inconsistent attendance at worship services and other gatherings of believers” (pp. 131-32).

On p. 133 he describes, “bunny believer’ who hop around from one church to another without any identity, accountability, or commitment.”

He talks about the importance of not just attending a church but joining it. He says, “Attenders want the benefits of a church without sharing the responsibility. They are like couples who want to live together without committing to marriage.... The Christian life is more than just commitment to Christ; it includes a commitment to other Christians” (p. 137).

On p. 150 he talks about the importance of frequency in meeting saying that the reason fellowship is so shallow in many churches is because “we don’t spend enough time together.” He also notes “community is not built on convenience.”

He also emphasizes the importance of protecting your church’s unity (day 21, p. 160). “Divorcing your church at the first sign of disappointment or disillusionment is a mark of immaturity” (p. 163).

IV. Things that raise concern.

I cannot, however, offer this book my uncritical endorsement. I heard one pastor say that reading this book is like eating fish. You get some good meat but you better watch out for the bones!

Here are some of the bones:

1. Confusion as to who is being addressed: believers or non-believers?

This book is not marketed just to Christians. It is sometimes confusing as to who is being addressed.

On p. 34 Warren talks about the “test” before we enter eternity. God will ask two questions: (1) What did you do with my Son, Jesus Christ?; and (2) What did you do with what I gave you?

Later on pp. 57-59 he calls the reader to a decision: to believe and receive.

From here he assumes that all those who read the book are Christians and want to live like Christians. There are at least two problems here. First, Could this give “false assurance” to those who do not believe that if they live by these “rules” they will pass the test? Further, he never describes what constitutes failure on this test and what the consequences would be.

2. Although Warren repeatedly makes reference to the fact that our lives are to be lived for God's glory, the book offers some confusing ideas about God's sovereignty.

First, Warren stresses that "It's not about you." He gives lip service to grace: "God's word is clear that you can't earn your salvation. It comes only by grace, not your effort" (p. 72). And yet the description of **salvation** and **relationship with God** are one-sidedly man-centered.

Examples:

"God is not a cruel slave driver or bully who uses brute force to coerce us into submission. He doesn't try to break our will, but woos us to himself so that we might offer ourselves freely to him" (p. 79).

In some sense this is true but does not fit with Biblical picture of man's condition apart from salvation—spiritually dead (Eph 2:1). Would a corpse need to be driven or forced to be raised to life?

"Put Jesus Christ in the driver's seat of your life and take your hands off the steering wheel" (p. 83). If I have to "put Jesus Christ in the driver's seat" who is really in charge of my life?

"You are as close to God as you choose to be" (p. 92).

"Remember, it's your choice. You are as close to God as you choose to be" (p. 99).

But how does this compare with Jesus words in:

John 6:44: "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day."

John 15:16: "You did not choose Me, but I chose you..."

Romans 11:16: "So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs but of God who shows mercy."

1 John 4:19: "We love him because he first loved us."

There is certainly a place for human response. Faith is necessary. But Warren's view shifts the entire burden of "choice" to man. What about God's choice? Scripture gives all glory to God in salvation. Cf. Jonah 2:9: "Salvation is of the Lord." In Revelation 7:10 the redeemed multitudes cry out: "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb!" This is a more radical take on "It's not about you"!

Second, we see this in the description of **Providence**. In some places it seems that Warren presents a view of limited or partial sovereignty. That is, God ordains the big overall picture, but he leaves the details up to us.

Examples:

“God was thinking about you long before you ever thought about him. His purpose for your life predates your conception. He planned it before you existed, *without your input!* You may choose your career, your spouse, your hobbies, and many other parts of your life, but you don’t get to choose your purpose” (p. 21).

On vocation, he says, “The truth is, there are *many* different careers that could be God’s will for your life” (p. 177). But does this square with Psalm 139:16; Matthew 10:30?

Elsewhere he appears to affirm a more traditional view of Providence: “Because God is sovereignly in control, accidents are just incidents in God’s good plan for you. Because every day of your life was written on God’s calendar before you were born, *everything* that happens to you has spiritual significance” (p. 195).

Finally, we see it in the whole question of **purpose**. Though it claims to be about God’s purpose does it not aim out our own search for significance as central? In the end, much is made of man. Warren criticizes “popular Christian books” that settle for offering “personal fulfillment and emotional stability” as “narcissism, not discipleship” but, in the end, doesn’t *PDP* also fall into that trap?

3. The downplaying of right doctrine.

Warren downplays doctrine in favor of more simple and practical matters. The attitude seems to be that we need not bother with precision in doctrine as long as we seek to love and serve Jesus. Dead orthodoxy is a danger indeed, but so is belief without boundaries.

Examples:

He says that spiritual maturity is not measured by “the amount of Biblical information and doctrine you know.... The Christian life is far more than creeds and convictions.... Our deeds must be consistent with our creeds....” (p. 183).

“The Bible is far more than a doctrinal guidebook” (p. 186).

Question: Is this really a problem today? Are people too doctrinal? No, they read the Bible for moralisms.

“Personal stories” are easier to relate to than “principles, and people love to hear them.... Unbelievers would probably lose interest if you started quoting theologians, but they have a natural curiosity” about stories (p. 290).

Question: Do we avoid doctrine because people find it uninteresting?

“The last thing many believers need today is to go to another Bible study. They already know far more than they are putting into practice” (p. 231).

Question: Is this true? What about Psalm 1:2 that praises the man who meditates day and night on God’s law? Can we ever study enough?

Cf. also the contrast between “world-class Christians” who go off on mission trips and “worldly Christians” who “love to attend concerts and enrichment seminars” (p. 197). But what of the story of Mary and Martha in Luke 10? Martha was busy but Mary chose the better part in sitting at Jesus’ feet and receiving teaching. We do not have too much teaching but too little.

Warren quotes approvingly from Catholics Mother Theresa (125) and Henri Nouwen.

A July 21, 2003 *USA Today* profile of Warren noted that though a part of the “ultra-conservative SBC” his “pastor training programs welcome Catholics, Methodists, Mormons, Jews, and ordained women.”

The 40 Days of Purpose is used in multiple churches, evangelical, mainline, and even liberal across denominational boundaries. But is this good? If it can be used by anyone does it define doctrine closely enough?

4. Failure to emphasize the wrath of God and the holiness of God, in addition to his grace and love.

Warren talks much about how much God loves us, but he speaks not at all of God’s wrath at sin.

One of the worst quotes: “God is not mad at you, he’s mad about you...” (p. 98).

Question: What then do we make of Habakkuk 1:13 which says that God’s eyes are too pure to look on evil or of Psalm 5:5 which says God hates all workers of iniquity?

5. Too broad a definition of worship.

Warren says that worship is pleasing God. We should not think of it in conventional terms as “singing, praying, listening to a sermon” (p. 64). Instead, “Worship is a lifestyle” (p. 65). Is this Biblical? If everything is worship, nothing is.

6. An overemphasis and worldly (modern therapeutic) view on the use of small groups.

Warren stresses sharing of painful past experiences. Is this a Biblical model? What about the gathered church, not in small groups but as an aggregate together? If there are small groups, who offers teaching and oversight?

7. Low view of the role of preaching in worship and in evangelism.

There is very little emphasis on preaching in evangelism. This contrast with what Paul wrote in Romans 10:14, 17 (“Faith comes by hearing”) and 1 Corinthians 1:21: “it pleased God by the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe.”

8. Decision-istic evangelism that has the shadow-side of promoting easy-believism. Are you a Christian just because you say you are?

What about repentance and the fruit of conversion?

9. Warren makes use of various translations, including paraphrases.

Warren defends this as offering a fresh reading of scripture. But does it downplay the doctrine of plenary verbal inspiration?

10. Has the programmatic marketing of this book been a good thing for Christianity?

Before we jump on the *PDL* bandwagon, do we need to ask whether it is good to popularize a shallow vision of the Christian life?

V. What will be the fruit?

The real evaluation of the *PDL* will not be held in our times but in days to come at the judgement. It will not be made by men but by the Lord. What will be the lasting fruit? Men in the past have had numerically successful ministries that have faded over time. An example of this would be the ministry of Charles Grandison Finney, the great revivalist of the nineteenth century. Compare his influence with that of, say, Charles H. Spurgeon. Spurgeon’s ministry has prevailed because it was so doctrinal. It has staying power; whereas, Finney is largely forgotten.

I do not doubt Warren’s sincerity, but I wonder what his legacy will be. The error of liberalism is the attempt to alter God’s word in the name of relevance. I am afraid that Warren’s followers will err in this way. We are seeing this already in the “Emerging church movement.”

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