

Some Concerns about Warren's *The Purpose Driven Church*

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Upon reading through Rick Warren's *The Purpose Driven Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995) I am convinced that the motivations for such a church are completely wrong-headed. I have heard and read various views on the book and the general consensus is that the book is mostly good but there are some problems. I disagree. It is mostly problematic but Warren says a few good things.

I know I am starting off rather harshly. I will defend my strong statement in this paper.

Warren's other great book, *The Purpose Driven Life*, challenges the reader to make a self application. One Christian may apply it a little differently than another. *The Purpose Driven Church* is intended to be applied at the church level. Herein lies the first problem with the book. One member might apply the ideas one way and another likely another way. Even in a very small church, rapid disagreements and quarrels will arise. Indeed, there are several sections that appear to contradict. If this little book were The Bible people could get into heated arguments from the text alone – about how it should be applied. I'll detail some examples below.

I question, first, why anybody would be compelled to impose the suggestions in this book upon his own church family. It's highly denominational and replete with denominational language. Speaking for myself, it's a quick turn-off. But I digress.

Warren begins his book by pointing out that different approaches to evangelism come and go. He promotes discovering evangelistic waves and surfing them for as long as they are effective. “If you take a class on surfing, you'll be taught everything you need to know about surfing: how to choose the right equipment; how to use it properly; how to recognize a 'surfable' wave; how to catch a wave and ride it as long as possible; and, most important of all, how to get off a wave without wiping out” (13). He has a good point – especially with the need of knowing when to abandon the wave. He says, “The older a church gets, the truer this becomes. Programs and events continue to be added to the agenda without ever cutting anything out” (89). On the other hand, are we expected to plug into our church some program or method that is effective for some other church (and further expect it to be just as effective)? Definitely not. The church has Biblical direction and that's what should be followed! I am in full agreement with Warren when he says

Attendance campaigns and advertising may bring people to your church once. But they will not come back unless your church delivers the goods. ... If you are preaching the positive, life-changing Good News of Christ (1 Cor 2:1-5), if your members are excited by what God is doing in your church, if you are providing a service where they can bring unsaved friends without embarrassment (1 Cor 14:23f; Jam 2:1-4), and if you have a plan to build, train, and send out those you win to Christ (Mat 28:19-20), attendance will be the least of your problems (48, Biblical citations mine).

Preaching is definitely a purpose of the church. Warren also correctly says (although I don't know if he means it the same way with which I agree), “[I]t takes all kinds of churches to reach all kinds of people. ... I think diversity in style is a strength, not a weakness” (61). My agreement with this statement has everything to do with style. Some churches like a worship style featuring lots of “amens” and “preach-it-brothers” while others prefer a more subdued style. Some churches love the high-church music; some

enjoy the gospel songs; some prefer the praise song style and some love to blend the different types into a single song service. I have a problem when when some member (or members) comes along and tells a church it needs to change its worship style. Oftentimes this member has just finished reading his copy of *The Purpose Driven Church* and he came to his church family to tell them they have to become “seeker focused,” beginning with the worship style. The strong seeker focus of Warren's book tends to take weight off the importance of meeting the worship expression styles of the current membership. Warren has some disdain for older churches as assemblies that are stuck in their ways. I'll comment more on that bent later.

We must worship in a way that works for the membership of our Christian church family. However, some members tend to look at the fast growing mega-churches and see their success as evidence that the means to their success must be the best, or only way. Even Warren suggests the formula Big Church = Right Church is good math.

Your church, regardless of its size or location, will be healthier, stronger, and more effective by becoming a purpose-driven church.

The apostle Paul said God will judge whatever we build on the basis of whether it will last: “The fire will test the quality of each man's work. If what he has build survives, he will receive his reward” (1 Cor 3:13-14). Paul also tells us that the key to building something that lasts is to build it on the right foundation: “But each one should be careful how he builds. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 3:10-11).

Strong churches are built on purpose! By focusing equally on all five of the New Testament purposes of the church, your church will develop the healthy balance that makes lasting growth possible (80-81).

First off, the fire in the cited 1 Cor 3 passages means fierce persecution. If a church survives fierce persecution it says something very good about how it was built. That kind of fire does not apply to Warren's description of a church built on his five New Testament purposes. The current Christian assemblies in the United States suffer nothing like the Near Eastern churches of the first century. “Nothing precedes purpose” (81), he says. By his description of a purpose-driven church, it is a church that has modeled itself so that it is attractive to the “unchurched.” They bring people in by featuring popular worship music, exciting services and an attractive building. Warren's ideal church doesn't sound like a church built on Christ. In the quote above, right after Paul explains the lasting church is built on Jesus Christ, Warren says it is built “on purpose!” Fascinating. He says “I knew that if our church was going to attract and win the unchurched, it was going to take a different kind of service than I grew up with” (41). He describes with disdain the kind of service that is a no-nonsense expression of adoration of God by born again Christians.

Most evangelical churches conclude their worship service with an altar call. This indicates that, functionally, we connect worship with evangelism. But many do not realize that it is a self-defeating strategy to focus the first fifty-eight minutes of a service on believers and suddenly switch the focus to unbelievers in the last two minutes. Unbelievers are not going to sit through fifty-eight minutes of a service that isn't in the slightest way relevant to them. The entire service, not just the invitation, must be planned with the unchurched in mind (254).

He has a good point about making the “altar call” a call to unbelievers. In the few instances I have seen an unbeliever respond to such an altar call he needed a little more instruction before he was really ready to obey the Gospel. We should probably drop the “how-to-become-a-Christian” bit from the invitation unless the whole sermon is about it.

The problem with planning the whole service for unbelievers is the assumption that church services exist for evangelism. Church services are for worship. Evangelism primarily is the function of Christians (Acts 8:4). Secondly, it is the function of the church (Acts 13:1-3, etc).

Warren has his list of five church purposes. Four of the five are definitely responsibilities of Christians that Warren has transferred to the church in general. Here is Warren's list (103-107):

1. Love the Lord with all your heart.
2. Love your neighbor as yourself.
3. Go and make disciples.
4. Baptizing them.¹
5. Teaching them to obey.

Warren correctly observes that the purpose of the church defines its actions. He further states, to my raised eyebrows, “If you want your church to become purpose driven, you will have to lead it through four critical phases. First you must define your purposes” (93-94). Step number one is a fumble. If the ball is dropped on the snap there is no point to finishing the play. The purpose of the church is clearly defined in the Bible and it *isn't* what Warren says it is and it isn't open for a church to define for itself.

I propose the following list (probably incomplete) as Biblical purposes of the church:

1. Accountability (Heb 10:25). The church holds its members accountable for their lives in Christ.
2. Share in suffering (Gal 6:2; Heb 10:32-36; 13:3; Phil 4:15-20).
3. Discipline (1 Cor 5). The church disciplines its unruly members.
4. Instruction (1 Cor 14:22-25; Acts 2:42, 20:7; 2 Tim 4:2, etc). The church provides for teaching within the body. This purpose includes instruction that grows novice Christians into mature Christians. This purpose, by the way, agrees with Warren's “Teaching them to obey” element.
5. Worship (Heb 12:28-29; John 4:23).
6. Internal Benevolence (1 Tim 5:9-11).

Warren started his Saddleback church by first polling the community to learn what people religiously “needed.” He structured his church to meet those statistically compiled needs (139). According to the Bible people are attracted to Christ by the behavior of Christians (John 13:34-35; 1 Cor 13, 16; etc). Warren suggests a carefully organized worship service will attract unbelievers to Christ, even at the expense of existing members!

Saddleback uses pop/rock style music in the services. I will admit that we have lost hundreds of potential members because of the style of music Saddleback uses. On the other hand, we have attracted thousands more because of our music (285).

[M]ost church services move at a snails pace. There is a lot of “dead time” between different elements. When the minister of music finishes a song, he walks over and sits down. Fifteen seconds later, the pastor thinks about

getting up. Finally, he slowly moves to the pulpit and welcomes the people. By this time, unbelievers have already fallen asleep. Work on minimizing transitional times. As soon as one element ends, another should begin (255).

That last point has some merit to it. Transitions should be as smooth as possible. I, being a “minister of music” try to have the invitation (conclusion) song already pitched when the service transitions to it – so it can be promptly started. On the other hand, there are some features of worship that are inherently slow and reflective, such as the serving of the Lord's Supper. The interest in avoiding this slowness I suppose has been the motivation of some denominations to limit the frequency with which the Supper of the Lord is served. Christians need to learn how to worship, which includes quiet reflection, attention and focus. Warren, on the other hand, argues that peoples' attention spans are getting shorter as a result of the excessive time we spend being entertained. He says we need to make our services match peoples' attention spans. We need to modernize. He sees instruments and drama as examples of progress that can be slowed but not stopped (283-284).

Warren has a strong My-Way-Or-The-Highway attitude that surely transfers to his readers. He believes, but doesn't say so explicitly, that he has no use for seasoned (mature) or experienced (non-novice) Christians. He believes they are way too “tradition-driven.”

Older churches tend to be bound together by rules, regulations, and rituals, while younger churches tend to be bound together by a sense of purpose and mission.... Ralph Neighbor says the seven last words of the church are, “We've never done it that way before” (77).

It's far easier to set the right foundation at the start of a new church than it is to reset it after a church has existed for years (81).

In other words, don't bother making your old church a purpose-driven church. Start a new one. No experienced members allowed. This attitude (disdain for the older members) is so unscriptural it defies the senses! Take a look at John 9:8; 1 Tim 5:1-2, 17-22, Tit 2:1-5; Heb 5:12; 1 Pet 5:3; Joel 1:2-3; Deut 6:6-7; Exod 12:26-27. Older members are the most important members of a church! We don't just dump them because they don't accept our new-fangled worship style!

Warren strongly advises against any attempt at “reinventing” your congregation. It is better to just start a new congregation (179-180).

The attitude of non-compromise is very strong in the book.

People who transfer their membership to your church carry cultural baggage from their previous church, and they may have certain expectations your church has no intention of fulfilling. This fact became evident to me in the early days of Saddleback, even before we started public worship services. One of the men in our home Bible study group had been a member of a well-known large church in our area for twelve years. Every time we started to plan something he'd say, “Now, at my old church we did it like this.” This became his recurring refrain.

After about eight weeks of this, I finally said, “You know, if you want a church just like your old church, why don't you go back there? It's only

thirteen miles up the road.” He took my advice and left with his family of five (92).

...

That experience also taught me that the best time to discover anyone's conflict with your church's philosophy of ministry is *before* they join. Explaining your church's purposes to people before they join will not only reduce conflict and disappointment in your church, it will also help some people realize they should join another church because of philosophy or personal taste (93).

In some respect, peoples' “cultural baggage” needs to be known up front – especially if they are going to be uncompromising about it themselves. I'm thinking on an instance in which a family joined up with our group and they actually warned us they were troublemakers. Nobody asked them to elaborate. What their “baggage” was is their insistence upon the use of the King James Version of the Bible. They worked very hard at dividing the church over the use of other translations.

My biggest problem with *The Purpose Driven Church* is that I have seen people read it and try to implement it in their home congregations. The result was not growth but shrinkage. Long-time members found other assemblies more to their style. New members, attracted by the cool modern and entertaining services soon moved on to denominations that did the entertainment bit even better. After having read this book I can see why. Readers followed Warren's advice and dumped their seasoned members in an attempt to become the next Saddleback Church.

Christ's church was built by Christ for Christians. It is a support community for believers. It's focus is Christ, not seekers.

Some final thoughts

There are a few more points with which I wholeheartedly agree and are noteworthy – although they are merely where my opinions and Warren's agree. He counsels against long public prayers.

Keep your pastoral prayers short in your seeker services. It is not the time to intercede for sister Bertha's ingrown toenail! The unchurched can't handle long prayers; their minds wander or they fall asleep. Pastors should be wary of using the pastoral prayer to catch up on their quiet time (256)!

I don't know if short prayers are necessary; but interceding in the public prayers for the many things that are bothering individual members becomes overwhelming for members and non-members alike. I attend a very small congregation (around 70 members) and the prayer intercessions for individuals and their friends and acquaintances becomes overwhelming at times. Even the morning announcements sometimes become mind-numbing. Every need is mentioned in the bulletin. Members should consult that list in their personal quiet times.

Warren cautions against spending too much effort encouraging fair weather members to attend when the efforts could be spent strengthening the faithful members and on personal evangelism. “It usually takes five times more energy to focus on disgruntled members. I believe God has called pastors to catch fish and feed sheep, not corral goats” (183)!

Warren carefully picks his scriptures and sometimes uses a peculiar translation to make his point. The

passages are sometimes quoted out of context in order to make his point. One outstanding example was his use of Titus 2:10 to prove that the interior of the church building should be attractive if we want to attract the unchurched.

The goal in all that we do to brighten up the environment is the same as what Paul said in Titus 2:10 (italics added): "... so that in every way they will make the teaching about God our Savior *attractive*" (269-270).

The passage cited has nothing to do with an attractive sanctuary lobby. It is about Christian behavior – particular the behavior of slaves. If they are respectful they become ornaments "to the doctrine of God our Savior."

There are contradictions in several places within the text. If people pick up this book as a textbook for transforming their church into a purpose-driven church there are sections that seem ready-made for causing arguments. He says on page 88, "Anytime someone suggests an activity, or an event or a new program you should simply ask, 'Will this fulfill one of the church purposes?' If it does, do it. If it doesn't, don't do it." However, across the same opening, on page 89 he says, "In my opinion, most churches try to do too much. This is one of the most overlooked barriers to building a healthy church: we wear out people. ... The older a church gets, the truer this becomes. Programs and events continue to be added to the agenda without ever cutting anything out." This second part makes more sense than the first part; but I am particularly disturbed by how I have seen people apply this book. They tend to follow the first part of the advice. If an idea is consistent with the purpose of the church, they do it regardless of members' styles or preferences.

There is more I can say; but I have said enough.

Warren's *The Purpose Driven Church* attempts to provide a method by which other churches can emulate the success of the Saddleback church. In practice, churches that apply the principles in the book either shrink and become ineffective or, after they have gotten rid of the members who are entrenched in their traditions, they do what they want.

This book is not the last big idea that is going to result in a movement within the Brotherhood. Having seen a number of movements – some of which having caused a lot of damage – I advise a circumspective eye to future movements. The church tends to watch with interest the big things that happen in denominations and then try to implement them. I'm certain if John Westley's Methodist movement happened today we would want to impose it on ourselves.

Please, when examining new ideas that emerge from denominations or other places, look very carefully to see if they are built upon scripture. *The Purpose Driven Church* fails the test.

Notes:

1. I agree that it is the Christian's responsibility to baptize. I was fascinated at Warren's explanation which has no connection with baptism. "Why is baptism so important to warrant inclusion in Christ's Great Commission? I believe it is because it symbolizes one of the purposes of the church: fellowship – identification with the body of Christ" (105). The purpose of baptism is *not* fellowship or some symbolic act to identify a person to a church.