

The Purpose Driven® Life – A Book Review

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Introduction

Rick Warren is the senior pastor of Saddleback Community Church in Lake Forest, CA and author of this New York Times bestseller (4.5 million copies already sold). It seems that everyone knows someone who is reading through the book as well as going through it in his/her church. Even President Bush and his wife have read it!¹ Throughout this past year I have been asked several times, “What is *The Purpose Driven® Life* about?” (yes, even the phrase is reserved!). So, I joined the millions of other Americans and sauntered through this bestseller that is supposedly radically changing churches across the country.

Many churches across America, whether purpose-driven or traditional, are engaged in the “40 Days of Purpose” and are expecting great results as well as experiencing much change in the lives of their parishioners. Many have come to Christ through this book, and for this I am grateful to God. So, what makes this book so appealing? Why are some saying this book is destined to be the next “classic” on the Christian life?

On a foundational level, Warren meets a basic need. It is found in the subtitle of the book – What on earth am I here for? No one wants to live a life that proves to be a waste. Every Christian wants to have his/her life matter when it is over. So, this question begs for a purpose, one that will drive the believer’s life to victory.

Overview

The book begins with a challenge to take the next forty days to answer the big questions in life (9). It promises to transform the reader’s life in this time period (10). The reader is asked to make a covenant, to discover God’s purpose for his/her life. There is a place for the reader and a partner to sign as well as Rick Warren’s pre-printed signature.

The book is divided up into five sections fleshing out the five-fold purpose for every person. They are the basics of the Christian life: 1) worship, 2) fellowship/community, 3) discipleship/sanctification, 4) service/ministry, and 5) evangelism. Throughout the book, Warren calls his readers to live their entire life for God’s glory. He challenges the comforts and excuses of many American Christians and exposes the temporal nature of not living for God’s purposes. *Leadership* journal states that “there’s not much really new about Warren’s advice, except its sudden popularity.”²

The book consists of 40 short chapters, one for each day of the “40 Days of Purpose.” At the end of each chapter, there is an application box which includes a “Point to Ponder,” a memory verse, and a “Question to Consider.” The last chapter ends with a challenge to write down a life purpose specific to the reader. It has three appendices which include small group questions, a list of “purpose driven” resources, and Warren’s reasons for using different translations of the Bible in the book.

Strengths

By and large, the book promotes godly living. It is a review of the basics of the Christian life. Who could argue with a strong emphasis on God’s sovereignty and His demands for humankind to worship Him. Throughout the book, living for eternity (as opposed to living for the shallow, temporal delights) is a continual challenge to the reader. He calls the reader to see life realistically, that is the “preschool” (36) for life in eternity. He has an accurate view of worship showing that it is far more than music, and that it is a lifestyle (64-65). He points out that worship is not for the worshiper’s benefit, but God’s, and that worship is not a part of the Christian’s life – it is the Christian’s life (66).

In the second section he teaches the importance of God’s family (eternal) vs. the earthly family (temporal). He accurately confronts the lack of Body Life in many churches. For example, “[R]elationships, not achievements or the acquisition of things, are what matters most in life. So why do we allow our relationships to get the short end of the stick? When our schedules become overloaded, we start skimming relationally, cutting back on giving time, energy,

¹ “A Purpose-Driven Bestseller,” *Leadership* 24/4 (Fall 2003): 7.

² *Ibid.*

and attention that loving relationships require. What's most important to God is displaced by what's urgent" (125). He supports the local church and gives six great reasons why every believer must belong to one: 1) it identifies you as a genuine believer, 2) it moves you out of self-centered isolation, 3) it helps you develop spiritual muscle, 4) the Body needs you, 5) you share in Christ's mission in the world, 6) it keeps you from backsliding (133-35).

Throughout the third section he gives some good practical tips on how to change as a result of being convicted by the Word as well as helpful ways on tracing temptation, praying in the midst of it and having victory over it.

In the fourth section, he discusses the absolute necessity of service for the Christian and how every believer is uniquely gifted by God. He also does a great job showing the mind set of a servant.

Lastly, he emphasizes evangelism and how to put together and share a testimony.

Weaknesses

While there are many attributes of the book that are fine and even worthy of commendation, there are also some slight problems as well.

1. *It is fluffy.* Albeit, pretty good fluff, but it lacks real depth. Some have labeled it as being the ABC's of the Christian life or Christianity for 4th graders. The book is full of one liners and soon to be Christian cliches. Typically, just scratching the surface and leaving the reader wanting more substance (i.e., exposition of Scripture, deep and meditative thoughts – traits you would expect of the next Christian "classic").

2. *It is a bit formulaic.* Just give it 40 days and your life will be radically transformed. Why forty days? Because a lot of great things happened in 40 days in the Bible (Noah and the Flood, Moses on Mt. Sinai, spies in the land, Jesus in the wilderness, etc.). But terrible events also transpired in forty days. While Moses was receiving the law on Sinai, the Israelites became idolaters and worshiped the Golden Calf in forty days! So, why forty days? Why not fifty days (Lev 23:16)? Why not ten days (Jer 42:7; Dan 1:12-15)? Warren comments, "Whenever God wanted to prepare someone for his purposes, he took 40 days" (9). This is simply not true. Prophets used for God's purposes typically waited 30 years before beginning their ministry. In the case of Noah, although it rained for 40 days and nights, he was actually in the ark for about 377 days (cf. Gen 7:11 with Gen 8:13-14)! Did God only transform him during the first 40? Or did God prepare Noah over the course of several years while he built the ark? Perhaps, God actually took 600 years to prepare him (he was this age at the time; Gen 7:6)! Simply put, the text doesn't say. The apostle Paul was prepared for his mission to the Gentiles over the course of 14 years. In many of Warren's examples, the text does not say or indicate they were being prepared for God's purposes or that their lives were transformed in that period of time.

3. *It contains some theologically unclear and even contradictory statements.* In chapter 13 when he writes about worship that pleases God (worship that is in spirit and in truth - Jn 4:23), he explains that there are different types of worshippers. This is true. But then he goes on to say that everyone worships his own way. The problem is that this approach to worship (it seems he is talking about corporate worship) is individualistic and neglects to take into account the Body. Do the saints around the worshiper matter? Can one do anything s/he likes because worship is individual? I hope not. Corporately, Israel all followed those leading in worship and did the same thing. One of the problems in Corinth was that people weren't caring for others in the Body and were doing whatever they wanted. The result was chaos, thus Paul's need for the exhortation, "But all things must be done properly and in an orderly manner" (1 Cor 14:40).

Some of the statements in the book are unclear because they are overstatements. For example he writes, "Because God is love, the most important lesson he wants you to learn on earth is how to love" (123). Is this really true? Yes, it is important, but is it the *most* important? There is no Scripture reference to support this statement. Later he states, "God's ultimate goal for your life on earth is not comfort, but character development" (173). Again, is that really God's ultimate goal. These overstatements even appear contradictory to each other. Is it love or character development? Another contradictory statement is when he defines what a weakness is and how God's power is made known in weakness. He states that a weakness is not a "vice, sin or character defect" (273). Instead, it is an inherited limitation that is unable to be changed (i.e., physical disability, emotional trauma, or intellectual struggles). This is fine. But most of his examples are biblical examples of people in sin. For example, Moses' temper that caused him to murder and strike the rock (275). A bad temper is sin. All of the following examples of weakness are sin (Gideon's lack of faith, Peter's impulsive and weak-willed nature, David's adultery, John's arrogance, Barak's lack of faith, Samson's immorality and pride), none of which fit his definition of a weakness (275-76). Overall, his biblical examples serve to make his teaching on weakness unclear to the reader.

There are other unclear statements on unity and the Holy Spirit. When discussing unity, he encourages the reader to focus on commonalities instead of disagreements and to consider others important. These are important, but he leaves the reader without an objective source for unity – Jesus Christ, His Gospel. Christians are called to be of the same mind and the same judgement, not just generally, but concerning the truth of Christ and His Word (Jn 17:17-23; Rom 15:5; 1 Cor 1:10; Eph 4:1-6). Another troubling statement is “The Holy Spirit releases his power *the moment* you take a step of faith” (174, emphasis his). He offers no text to back up this claim, and it is unclear as to how the Holy Spirit works. Is the Holy Spirit like an air compressor tank that is full just waiting for someone to obey so he can release? Is he not releasing His power in the believer’s life the moment before or after? It just seems like a bit of an overstatement which leads to a lack of theological clarity.

Another theologically blurry statement is given when he makes a distinction between a worldly Christian and world class-Christians (297). “Worldly Christian” is an oxymoron! Perhaps, a “worldly Christian” is not a Christian (Matt 7:21; Jn 3:36; Rom 1:5; 6:1-2; 16:26; Eph 2:10; Heb 5:9; 1 Jn 3:10)! Christians are known by their fruit. If they have no fruit, they are broken off and cast into the fire (Jn 15:5-6).

Lastly, Warren’s presentation of the Gospel is only a partial presentation. It largely consists of “all you need to do is *receive* and *believe*” (58, italics his). There is no mention of a holy God who hates sin and will pour out His wrath one day on the unrepentant (Rom 2:4-6). There is no emphasis on man in rebellion against Jesus’ lordship (Phil 2:9-11). The words “repent,” “confess” and “submit” are missing from his Gospel presentation. Yet, the Scriptures teach all of these along with receiving and believing (Luk 5:32; Act 26:20; Rom 2:4; Rom 10:9-10; Heb 12:17; 2 Pet 3:9).

4. *It lacks attention to the context of biblical passages which leads to bad interpretation.* James 3:1 states, “Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment.” A higher standard is set for teachers, and when they are not careful in the task of interpreting God’s Word, their teaching is flawed. Below is a small list of Scriptures where the context is ignored, and in some cases, even ignoring the verse itself to teach something different. The danger with such an approach is that the reader’s bias may cause him to read things into the text instead of reading out of the text what is really there.

& Matthew 6:24 – Warren interprets and applies this verse to serving God and serving **others** because of the pressure they put on you (30). In the context, even in the same verse it is talking about serving God or **money**. The verse would have been appropriate in Warren’s previous section in the book on materialism.

& Isaiah 49 – He misunderstands Isaiah to be the “servant,” and then says Isaiah was one without purpose (30). The “Servant” is actually referring to the Messiah and neither Isaiah nor the Messianic figure was struggling with a lack of purpose. The complaint was concerned with the lack of response from the hard-hearted nation of Israel.

& Jeremiah 29:11 – This text speaks to Israel in exile and her promises as the covenant people. Warren directly applies it to the reader (31, 198).

& Proverbs 13:7 – The text says, “There is one who pretends to be rich, but has nothing; Another pretends to be poor, but has great wealth.” Warren uses this verse to support this statement: “Purpose-driven living leads to a simpler lifestyle and a saner schedule” (31). Certain proverbs simply state what commonly happens, sometime to get the reader to discern if there is something beyond the appearance. This is what is happening here. The author of Proverbs 13:7 is highlighting that both are *pretending*, therefore use wisdom and discernment and look beyond the facade. This text says nothing of living a simpler life and having a better daily schedule.

& Friend of God vs. Fearing God – Warren misunderstands what it means to be a friend of God. He contrasts NT believers as being friends with God with those in the OT who mainly feared God (86). New Testament believers fear God too! Hebrews 12:28-29 says, “Therefore, since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service **with reverence and awe**, for our God is a consuming fire (italics/bold/underlining mine). 1 Peter 1:17-19 states, if you address as Father the One who impartially judges according to each one’s work, **conduct yourselves in fear** during the time of your stay on earth; knowing that you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers, but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ (bold & italics mine).

& 1 Corinthians 14:16-17 – He uses this text to address being sensitive to *unbelievers* (104), but the text isn’t talking about unbelievers. It is actually talking about *believers that don’t have the gift of tongues* or

interpretation not being able to understand when one with the gift of tongues used it without interpretation. This act would be selfish and insensitive to your brother or sister who is ungifted in this area.

& Matthew 18:20 – This verse is one of the most common to rip out of its context. It says, “For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst.” This verse is speaking of the validity of two or three witnesses in the case of church discipline. However, Warren uses it to support small groups. “God has made an incredible promise about small groups of believers” (139).

These are some of the cases where the context of Scripture is disregarded. Warren does comment in the end that he wished he could have explained “the fascinating context” (307) of each passage, but space did not permit him to do so. A lack of space is not a good excuse! Even if one does not have the space to explain in detail the context, the verse can still be used appropriately instead of ignoring the context and using it to teach things that are not in the text. Warren, as an author and teacher, sets a dangerous pattern for people to read into the text anything they would like to see there.

5. *It uses a variety of Bible versions, some of which distort the original text thereby changing the true meaning and proper emphasis.* Warren’s goal in using fifteen translations of the Bible is admirable: to get the reader to see the familiar Bible passages in “new, fresh ways” (325, italics his). Unfortunately, the reader ends up seeing it “new and fresh,” but in *wrong* ways. The problem is that many of the translations used mangle what the text actually says instead of highlighting the nuances of the original Hebrew and Greek (typically the goal of most modern interpretive versions). Probably, the most damaging Bible version used in the book is *The Message* translation by Eugene Peterson, a writer and poet. On the back cover of *The Message* it states that it “will startle and surprise you.” This is true – it is all too startling! Below, a chart is provided which shows how some texts are obliterated in using bad translations. They will be compared with the *New American Standard 1995 Update* version which attempts to be a word for word equivalence from the original languages into English. Other versions could be used, but I have chosen the NAS because of my familiarity with it, not because it is the “only” version.

Text	Bad Translation Used in <i>Purpose Driven Life</i>	NASB 1995 Update
Rom 8:6	Obsession with self in these matters is a dead end; attention to God leads us out into the open, into a spacious, free life (Message).	For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace,
1 Cor 2:7	God’s wisdom . . . goes deep into the interior of his purposes. . . . It’s not the latest message, but more like the oldest—what God determined as the way to bring out his best in us (Message).	but we speak God’s wisdom in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God predestined before the ages to our glory;
Jn 4:23	That’s the kind of people the Father is out looking for: those who are simply and honestly themselves before him in their worship (Message).	But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers
Jam 1:18	It was a happy day for him when he gave us our new lives, through the truth of his Word, and we became, as it were, the first children in his new family (Living Bible).	In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth, so that we would be a kind of first fruits among His creatures.
Rom 12:2	God brings the best out of you (Message).	but be transformed by the renewing of your mind,
Gal 6:4	Make a careful exploration of who you are and the work you have been given, and then sink yourself into that (Message).	But each one must examine his own work, and then he will have reason for boasting in regard to himself alone, and not in regard to another.

Some of these examples at first glance may not seem that bad, but they ignore the context and modernize the Bible so much that the original setting is lost as well as the argument of the book. Many of the translations tend to be man-

centered as well as promoting faulty ideas of what the original words mean. Probably, the greatest example of where a bad translation takes a serious “nose dive” is in Warren’s discussion of understanding the believer’s ministry in the body. He makes the distinction between “grace gifts” and natural abilities which is needed in our day when people think natural abilities fall in the category of the gifts in Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12. But, in the section where he is talking about natural abilities (and not “grace gifts” given to believers by the Spirit), he quotes 1 Peter 4:10 from the *Living Bible* which says “God has given each of you some special **abilities** . . .” Warren goes on to explain how these abilities are being used at his church like a mechanic fixing donated cars, etc. (244). The problem is that the word used in the Greek is the same word used in 1 Corinthians 12 talking about grace gifts (*charisma*). This could have been avoided had he used an accurate translation which would read “gifts” and not “abilities.” But he ends up mishandling Scripture by using a translation that muddies the waters. It is dangerous to say “Thus says the Lord” when the text doesn’t say so. This danger results in making God a liar!

Summary

So, is the book and its author to be condemned? Of course not. I think Rick Warren is genuine in his heart for people and that he wrote the book to help people in his church and beyond.³ However, this book’s best-selling status is astonishing. One wonders, “Why is a book that just teaches the basics of the Christian life at a pretty shallow level revolutionizing churches all over America?” The answer is found in the poor state of American Christianity.

Some time ago, Warren wrote his first major book, *The Purpose Driven Church* which calls for the church to tailor its message on Sunday morning to unbelievers. He called for churches to reorient their services to be “seeker sensitive,” evangelistic focused instead of times to equip the saints for the work of ministry (Eph 4:11-12). The basic idea was to make church (the gathering of Christ’s followers) more comfortable for unbelievers. Biblically, there are several problems with this approach. In light of this, it is easy to see that *The Purpose Driven Life* addresses the need created by the *The Purpose Driven Church*, the seeker-friendly church growth movement. Unfortunately, many churches need an introduction to the ABC’s of the Christian life. Some have said that many of the seeker-sensitive churches are “a mile wide and an inch deep.” This is the obvious result when pastors stop feeding the sheep and begin attracting the goats. So, what is their answer? Read *The Purpose Driven Life*!

This book’s popularity should bring shame to pastors all over America. In essence, its popularity says, “Shame on you for not teaching and upholding the basics and not shepherding your people accordingly.” Churches are so busy trying to fit in with the world and to make the gospel palatable to people who hate God, that church according to the Bible is rarely seen. So, because of the pitiful state of the church today, this book is almost necessary. Because the church has been doing everything other than what it is supposed to, the basics have been forgotten. So, when they are given – it is radical, even something new. Yet, to those churches who have been fighting to be faithful to the Scriptures, it has been what they have been doing all along because they have maintained the purpose of the church to equip the saints and evangelize the lost. Therefore, spending much time teaching the Word, they have structured their ministries according to what the Bible teaches is most important.

What about Faith Community Bible Church?

Are we going to enter into the 40 Days of Purpose? Probably not. Why? Basically, because we are already working hard at the *purpose driven life* without the book. And Lord willing, we will continue to be biblically purpose driven in everything we do for the lifetime of this church. The first thing we taught on was worship (Purpose #1). One of our major emphases has been on fellowship (Purpose #2). We have worked hard to have regular times that would foster this atmosphere (HFG, family meetings, fellowship meals, etc.). Discipleship (Purpose #3) is also another emphasis. Many are involved in discipleship relationships or Bible studies, or accountability groups and we give sanctification a large role in our preaching, often having reflection times at the end of a sermon. Ministry (Purpose #4) is expected of every believer in the church, and we try hard to come alongside individuals in order to get people plugged in and serving. It has been a blessing to see how many people are serving one another and using their gifts in the body. Lastly, evangelism (Purpose #5) is our next focus. This year, our goal is to grow in the area of outreach, locally and globally.

³ Although there are some who see the purpose driven craze part of American, commercialized Christianity and are fed up with programmed church and how to books. For a rather sarcastic view of *The Purpose Driven Life* and the church growth movement in general, see Michael Spencer’s article online, www.internetmonk.com/rick.html.

What about you individually? Should you read the book? Sure, if you want to. Just use discernment as you read, just like you would with any other book, and especially make sure you check the Scripture references for accuracy. Overall, the book is not teaching heresy, and I have heard many stories of stagnant Christians who have grown tremendously as a result of reading it. For this, we praise God!