

The Wright Report

Rick Warren

TIM CHALLIES

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In past weeks I have been challenged by several fellow believers on my statements concerning some of the people I have written about on this site. In particular, people have questioned my views on Rick Warren and John Eldredge. Because of their impact on the evangelical church, I have written about each of these men extensively over the past year. While I have read everything I have written (obviously) I realize that some newcomers to this site have not, so I thought I would take the opportunity to present my case for why I have serious disagreements with both of these men. I would like to ensure that people realize I am not just pointlessly raging against these men to make myself feel better or to fulfill a need to complain about other professed Christians. I believe God calls us all to be Bereans and to evaluate every teaching by the unchanging standard of His Word. That is what I intend to do in these articles. You can read my article about John Eldredge [here](#). Today I will turn to Rick Warren.

Christianity Today has declared that Rick Warren is the most powerful voice in evangelicalism today and that is surely no exaggeration. Thousands of churches have participated in his *40 Days of Purpose* and *40 Days of Community* programs, many thousands have modeled themselves after *The Purpose Driven Church* and literally millions of Christians have read *The Purpose Driven Life*. Saddleback, the church which he founded, has become one of America's largest churches and is regarded as a model of successful church growth principles.

With the amazing success of his teachings, Warren has placed himself in a position of awesome responsibility. It is not only necessary but good that we examine what he teaches and determine if it lines up with the Scriptures. I will not pass judgment on Warren himself. I do not doubt that he truly seeks to do what is right and has done many commendable things. For example, he no longer accepts a salary from his church and actually repaid his salary from the first twenty five years of ministry. He does not live like a king, though with a book that sold nearly twenty million copies, he surely could. I also do not doubt his motives in doing what he does. I believe he is motivated by a desire to see the world changed and to see the Good News spread throughout the country and the world.

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Despite what I believe are noble motives, I find that Rick Warren and his Purpose Driven teaches raise many important problems. While his motives may be good, many of his teachings are directly opposed to Scripture. There are many issues I could touch on, but for sake of brevity I will emphasize four of the most major problems. It is to these that I will direct the remainder of this article. Please note that I will not discuss the issue of church growth as that is a topic that could easily consume an entire book.

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Abuse of Scripture

One of the most common complaints against Rick Warren is that he uses a plethora of Bible translations, often 10 or 15 in a single message or chapter of a book. I will address this issue first.

Though some King James-only proponents may disagree, it is my conviction that there is not a perfect translation of the Bible in the English language. The original autographs, as given to the writers of the Bible by the Holy Spirit are inspired — of that I have no doubt. But once we translate the original languages, we no longer have the perfect, inspired Word of God. We have a translation of it and hopefully a very accurate, excellently-researched translation, but we do not have a translation that has the infallibility and inspiration of the original. Because of this there may be times where on translation renders a passage more clearly or more accurately than another. In times like this it may be preferable or even necessary to provide a passage in a different translation and there is nothing wrong with doing this. If Rick Warren were to use differing translations for this reason, I would applaud his diligence in attempting to draw the most accurate meaning from the Scriptures. To examine this issue we will turn to one of Rick Warren's books.

Rick Warren quotes the Bible over 1,200 times in the text of *The Purpose Driven Life*. To do so, he uses fifteen different translations and paraphrases. Appendix 3 contains his rationale for this and he provides two reasons for the number of translations. The first is that in any single translation 'nuances and shades of meaning can be missed, so it is always helpful to compare translations.'

The second is 'the fact that we often miss the full impact of familiar Bible verses, not because of poor translating, but simply because they have become so *familiar*.' (author's emphases) He believes this will 'help you see God's truth in new, *fresh* ways.' (author's emphasis)

The author's logic is faulty as the two reasons he provides contradict each other. If a translation introduces something in a new and fresh way it will necessarily introduce new nuances and shades of meaning. The way to remove nuances and shades of meaning

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is to use as literal a translation as possible so that the words are God's alone and are not interpreted by the translator. The author can then exposit the text, clarifying what might require clarification. This is nothing more than the traditional means of teaching what the Bible says.

As for verses losing their full impact, this may happen to some Christians, but rather than use poor Scripture translations, the author should help the reader focus on the fact that as a Christian he should love the Bible. As with David, God's Law is to be our delight day and night and not something we grow tired of.

While Warren may attempt to justify his use of many translations, it is clear that he does so to read meanings into the Words of God. There are multitudes of passages in his books and messages where he uses a translation or paraphrase that provides a meaning absolutely foreign to the text. To prove this we will turn again to *The Purpose Driven Life*. On page 30 he talks about the hopelessness of a life lived without purpose. In discussing this under the heading of 'the benefits of purpose-driven living' he quotes the book of Job where Job says 'My life drags by — day after hopeless day.' Warren would have us believe that Job is bemoaning a life lived without purpose, but this is clearly not what God intends as the meaning of this passage. In the same chapter the author quotes Genesis 4:12 which says of Cain 'You will be a restless wanderer on the earth.' Again, this is made to sound like it has something to do with purpose. And again, this is a ridiculous assertion.

The Bible can only be understood with its context. There are historical contexts to the Bible that we cannot ignore if we are to truly understand it. For example, a passage written during the life of King David has an entirely different historical context than a passage written by the apostle Paul. If we try to understand Paul in the context of David, we will misread his teachings.

Similarly, each passage has an immediate context that we cannot ignore. Rarely can a verse be understood outside of the context of the verses and even chapters surrounding it. Warren continually ignores context, claiming promises the Scriptures do not support and ignoring parts of the passage that contradict what he would like it to say. A clear example of a promise that is not ours to claim (quoted in PDL, Day 10) is found in Jeremiah 29:11 which reads 'For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope.' While God does have plans for our life and does desire to give his children a future and a hope, this promise is not intended for all people. It was given to the Israelites within a specific context. Within the context of the book we find a parallel passage in Jeremiah 44:27 which reads 'I will watch over them for adversity and not for good...[they] shall be consumed

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by the sword and famine.’ I find it unlikely that Warren would teach that this passage likewise applies to all believers.

An example of quoting only a partial verse is in Warren’s use of Isaiah 44:2. This is used in the heading of the second chapter of *The Purpose Driven Life* and is rendered ‘I am your Creator. You were in my care even before you were born.’ The author chooses to quote only the first part of the verse. The second part, we see, goes directly against what he wants to say. It reads ‘Do not fear, O Jacob My servant; And you Jeshurun whom I have chosen.’ When viewed in the proper context we see that this verse applies only to a specific group — the Israelites.

I have dwelled on this point, I admit, but I believe it is crucial. As believers we are to be true to the original words of Scripture and not impose our desired meanings into the text. It is clear that Rick Warren continually crosses this line and does so through all areas of his ministry. The Bible is not ours to manipulate as we please. We need to treat it with the utmost respect, acknowledging that it belongs to God and is given to use to guide us in our worship of Him. Within the Word He provides wisdom on how we are to use and interpret the Word and we must be careful to follow His rules about His book. I believe we cannot overemphasize this point and it is the most important of all. Warren’s flippant use of Scripture is inexcusable and as one trained as a pastor he surely knows better. His disrespect for the Bible is a serious issue and one we simply cannot ignore or excuse.

The Gospel

Warren does not appear to have a biblical understanding of the Gospel — the Good News of Jesus Christ. He teaches a typical decisional regeneration that will surely lead many to believe they have made commitments to Christ when they have not. In *The Purpose Driven Life* he leads unbelievers in a short prayer which he says will usher them into God’s family. Prior to this he has made no clear presentation of the Gospel. He has not spoken about how our sin has separated us from God and condemned us to an existence apart from God. He has not spoken about the necessity of Christ’s sacrifice and His substitutionary death for us. Yet he leads people to say ‘Jesus, I believe in you and I receive you’ (page 58) and then follows with the astonishing words ‘Welcome to the family of God!’ How can people believe in One they do not know? A decision no more makes us part of the family of God than does baptism. We become part of God’s family when God regenerates us and adopts us into His family. This may take place at the moment of decision, but a decision does not necessarily cause it to happen. By declaring that anyone who said those words and meant them is a believer, he is giving false hope and shows a glaring misunderstanding of conversion and the Gospel.

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Warren's confusion about the Gospel is shown also in that he extends his Purpose Driven seminars to include Catholics and even Mormons. Presumably he must see some good in their systems of doctrine, both of which deny the very heart of the Gospel.

Pragmatism

Purpose Driven principles are inherently pragmatic. Pragmatism is the belief that consequences are the criteria of truth and usefulness. Therefore, if something works, it is good. Perhaps we see this clearest in Warren's statement that we should never criticize any method that God is blessing. This presupposes two things: first, that God only blesses things that are done exactly as He desires, and second that God's blessing is an accurate indicator of approval. It also implies that the things that do not work should be jettisoned in favor of those that do work. Clearly this is a philosophy that brings great success in the business world, but it is one that is foreign to the Scripture.

God does not always provide the results we would like to see. There are missionaries that have spent many years laboring in the mission field and have seen very few hearts and lives changed. Does this necessarily mean that their technique is flawed? Does it necessarily mean that they are not doing God's will? By no means! God sometimes chooses to provide results and other times He does not. Even Jesus experienced varied results when He ministered. In some towns the people listened and trusted in Him while other towns rejected Him. Again, this does not mean that Jesus' technique was flawed or that He was being disobedient. More than anything God desires and expects obedience of His children. Pragmatism has no answer to the question of how we determine obedience for obedience can only be determined through Scripture.

On the other hand we see many programs and philosophies in churches that seem to bring great success, so can we assume that these are bringing glory to God and meet with His approval? By no means! We are to hold everything to the unchanging standard of the Word of God. Only when it meets with the approval of the Scriptures can we have confidence that this is bringing honor to the Creator.

The obvious danger of pragmatism in the church is that we lose our focus on the absolute standard God has given us in His word. When we lose that focus the church is on the slippery slope to becoming like the world. When we discard of God's standards we must depend on our own deeply flawed standards. We begin to trust in ourselves and lose our trust in God.

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Pride

Rick Warren believes that God Himself provided the Purpose Driven principles. Because of this he feels a tremendous responsibility to take those principles to all churches and in doing this he has met with incredible success. As was mentioned earlier, tens of thousands of churches spanning nearly every denomination and millions of believers (and even millions of unbelievers) have been impacted by his ministry and have some familiarity with his teachings. Purpose Driven principles are presented as being synonymous with Biblical teachings on how a church should be run. Therefore, churches that do not participate are regarded as somewhat less than Biblical. Warren's Web site has a tool people can use to find a church in their area that has been modeled on Purpose Driven principles. As far as I can determine these churches are not examined by Warren in any way except to determine that they have participated in his programs.

I believe *40 Days of Purpose* and *40 Days of Community* are unique in the long history of the church. I cannot think of any other programs that asked a church to turn itself over completely to another pastor for the duration of a program. Warren believes the Purpose Driven principles are so important and so unique, that he asks pastors to hand them his church — programs, messages, worship and even private devotions — for 40 days. At the end of that time he indicates that the principles God has revealed to him will have transformed your church. It will be bigger (growth in numbers), be bringing in more money (growth in giving) and stronger (growth in small groups). He asks members of these churches to listen to his messages, his interpretation of Scripture, sing the songs he has chosen and study the topics he has outlined. Warren casts his vision for your church and then attempts to deliver that vision to you. The program is designed to infiltrate every important area of the church and remove those areas that are not deemed important. It is all-encompassing. Warren must believe he has such an exclusive grip on truth that he is the only one who can share this truth with churches. He does not merely share principles with pastors and ask them to take these to their congregations. No, he does the teaching himself, requiring nearly every aspect of the Christian walk be directed by him for a full 40 days. His pride is overwhelming.

Conclusion

It is my belief that Rick Warren and his Purpose Driven principles are doing harm to the church. This is not to say that any church that participates in them will be ruined or become apostate. However, I do believe that these principles represent an unbiblical model and one that is destined to weaken churches. Warren is more than a pastor and a teacher — he is a role model who is mimicked by hundreds of thousands of other pastors and teachers who seek to duplicate his success. What Warren teaches soon finds its way

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into evangelical churches across the world. We saw an example of this recently. When he encouraged pastors to dedicate resources to sending their congregations and communities to see *The Passion of the Christ*, thousands of churches immediately began to take action. I have little reason to doubt that we will see many more examples of this.

I urge believers to examine Rick Warren's teachings and methods and see if they line up with Scripture.



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