



## THE PURPOSE-DRIVEN PROGRAM A GROWING PHENOMENON IN THE CHURCHES

By Albert James Dager

**T**HOUSANDS OF CHURCHES around the world are incorporating teachings found in two best-selling books and disseminated through seminars. Those two books, *The Purpose-Driven Life* and *The Purpose-Driven Church*, have taken the Christian community by storm. This phenomenon is the product of Rick Warren, pastor of Saddleback Valley Community Church in Lake Forest, California.

Warren's first book, *The Purpose-Driven Church: Growth Without Compromising Your Message & Mission*, has been popular with pastors and other church leaders as a manual on how to help their churches grow. Since its first printing in 1995 it has sold over one million copies. It offers to those church leaders Warren's methods for church growth which he has devised over more than two decades as the founding pastor of Saddleback Church.

His second book, *The Purpose-Driven Life: What On Earth Am I Here For?*, is used as a study guide in small-group settings under the auspices of churches from virtually every denomination, including Roman Catholic, as well as many non-denominational churches. It has sold 7 million copies in 12 languages since it was published in the fall of 2002. In it, Warren lays out a 40-day spiritual journey in which individual Christians are encouraged to examine their lives and to take up the challenge to become more mature and Christ-like. Warren's message is that everyone has a purpose in life; it is up to each person to find out that purpose and pursue it with zeal.

Zeal permeates Warren's writing and speaking. There is no mistaking his determination to accomplish that to which he believes God has called him. Behind the self-deprecating manner in which he addresses his devotees lies a powerhouse of production. His brand of ministry has been likened to a melding of corporate business sense with spiritual fervor. He has even trademarked the term "purpose-driven."

Without a doubt, Rick Warren is having the greatest impact upon churches of every theological persuasion since Promise Keepers first came on the scene in 1991.

Warren's messages on how to bring maturity to the Christian's life and growth to the churches have been implemented by over 250,000 ministers from tens of thousands of churches worldwide whose pastors have attended Warren's Purpose-Driven Church Seminar over the past twenty years.

Church leaders from scores of countries and some sixty denominations have ordered his seminar tapes.

There is no questioning Warren's sincerity. Both those who agree and disagree with him would probably come to the consensus that Rick Warren truly believes he is on a mission from God.

Easily, this is the most prolific enterprise for church growth that we have seen. Some have even likened this movement to a new Reformation. Kelly Walter, pastor of Rock Brook Church in Belton, Mo., says, "This is like being alive in the day of Martin Luther—and being able to meet him." Walter has made the trip to Saddleback every year for the past decade.<sup>1</sup>

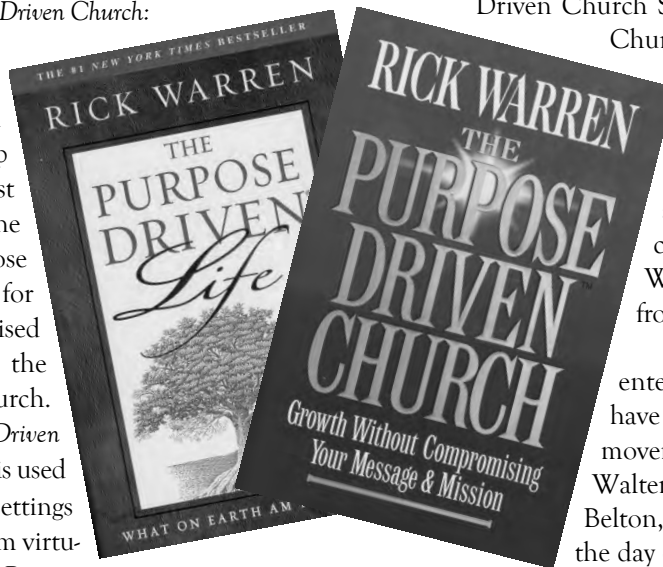
Warren himself has said, "The first Reformation clarified what the church believes—our message and doctrine. The current Reformation will clarify what the church does—our purpose and activities on earth."<sup>2</sup>

In spite of the great success of Warren's efforts to reach every church with his message, he has his detractors.

Dennis Costella, pastor of Fundamental Bible Church in Los Osos, Calif., said many struggling ministers see the purpose-driven strategy as a life preserver.

"If more pastors from small churches would just be faithful and rely on God, he will bless that faithfulness," said Costella. "He's not going to say, 'Let me see your stats sheet.'"<sup>3</sup>

Warren's style is described as "laid-back," and casual. His attire even for Sunday morning services often consists of khaki



pants and Hawaiian shirts. It is this casual demeanor that speaks to many who see him as just one of the guys. If he can achieve so much with his life, they reason, so can anyone.

In spite of the fact that he oversees a 17,000-member church with an annual budget of \$19 million,<sup>4</sup> Warren's focus is not on reaching millions directly (such as televangelists might) as much as it is equipping individual pastors to reach their own churches and communities with his program for growth.

Much of what Warren says is profoundly true. He has great insights into the problems that plague individual Christians as well as the churches as a whole. He has done his homework, and it is obvious that he has not spoken lightly, but rather determinedly in offering his solutions to those problems. He often offers clever clichés to make a point. One I really liked is "Humility is not thinking less of yourself; it is thinking of yourself less."

In the process of studying Warren's books, however, I have found many issues which cause concern. If one is going to place oneself under the teaching of another, one must recognize those things that are not scriptural in order to keep from being misled. We will address these issues by looking at Warren's two best-sellers, *The Purpose-Driven Life*, and *The Purpose-Driven Church*.

### THE PURPOSE-DRIVEN LIFE

Warren directs his book primarily toward Christians (although he does on occasion offer advice on salvation to non-believers). Generally, he assumes that the reader is a novice to the faith and must first take baby steps before he can walk. Yet he insists that *every* Christian should undertake the 40-day spiritual journey. But for mature believers in Jesus it would be more of a remedial course in the faith, much of it really unnecessary.

Warren offers a lot for the money:

By the end of this journey you will know God's purpose for your life and will understand the big picture—how all the pieces of your life fit together. Having this perspective will reduce your stress, simplify your decisions, increase your satisfaction, and, most important, prepare you for eternity.<sup>5</sup>

My first response to this statement was that believers already know these things; they are already laid out in the Bible. But there is a difference between knowing, and acting on the knowledge. The format of the 40-day journey is to read one chapter per day, then focus on the exercises at the end of each chapter. Each exercise consists of 1) a Point to Ponder; 2) a Verse to Remember; 3) a Question to Consider. Each element relates to the lesson of the particular chapter.

### Transformed Lives

Warren claims that his book will transform the lives of those who read it and interact with it:

One reason most books don't transform us is that we are so eager to read the next chapter, we don't pause and take the time to seriously consider what we have just read. We rush to the next truth without reflecting on what we have learned<sup>6</sup>.

For this reason the reader is encouraged to not just read the book, but to *interact* with it. In this way, we assume, it will transform our lives.

As far as rushing "to the next truth," truth is not always what we rush to in men's writings. And nothing outside of Scripture can transform lives. There are many excellent books that have been written by solid believers throughout the ages. Many have afforded great insight into spiritual matters; many have encouraged believers to live for God; many have resulted in some changes in people's lives. But none of them can *transform* anyone's life. Only God's Word, ministered by the Holy Spirit, can transform lives. And then it must be with the consent of the life transformed. Authors often take more credit than their due by making such claims about their writings. Yes, they may give the glory to God and claim that they are merely instruments used by Him. But there is a problem any time an author makes about his work, claims that are reserved for Scripture alone. No man's work—regardless of the good which results from it—is indispensable to God's eternal purposes.

Concluding his introduction, Warren asks the reader to sign a covenant with him to commit the next 40 days to discovering God's purpose for his life.

The Bible is clear that God considers 40 days a spiritually significant time period. Whenever God wanted to prepare someone for his purposes, he took 40 days:

Noah's life was transformed by 40 days of rain.

Moses was transformed by 40 days on Mount Sinai.

The spies were transformed by 40 days in the Promised Land.

David was transformed by Goliath's 40-day challenge.

Elijah was transformed when God gave him 40 days of strength from a single meal.

The entire city of Nineveh was transformed when God gave the people 40 days to change.

Jesus was empowered by 40 days in the wilderness.

The disciples were transformed by 40 days with Jesus after his resurrection.

The next 40 days will transform your life<sup>7</sup>.

It is true that 40 days is a significant time period in several Scriptures. But God did not always use 40 days to achieve His purposes in someone. It is presumptuous to insist that, because these particular biblical events incorporated 40 days, reading his book's 40 chapters one day at a time *will* transform your life.

The question comes to mind: has everyone who has followed the formula been transformed? If they had been, the millions who have read the book would be making news today.

It would have been better had Warren said, "The next 40 days *may be used by God to* transform your life."

And that is a possibility. Provided the reader takes only the scriptural portions of the book to heart and ignores the rest. Only God's Word can transform one's life. But ignoring the unscriptural aspects of Warren's writings is difficult when so much of the book is based not on Scripture as much as it is on

human reasoning and misapplied or mishandled Scripture. Yet I would not say that God cannot use this book just as he has used many imperfect offerings of men to achieve his purposes. However, that does not excuse the men who misuse His Word; it merely testifies to God's grace and sovereign ability to turn even the most gross evil into good for those who are called according to His purposes (Romans 8:28).

### Taking The Oath

The reader is also encouraged to partner with someone else as well as Rick Warren in order to solidify in their minds the importance of continuing the 40-day journey.

What is it about religious men that they want to bring people into bondage to their programs? Scripture continually warns us not to take oaths, but religious men think their particular oaths do not fall under Scripture's prohibitions. Just about every religious movement that comes along has some covenant or oath it encourages (and sometimes demands) its followers to sign or verbally agree to. Ostensibly these oaths are for the spiritual benefit of the individual. But as soon as one is encouraged to act contrary to God's Word by taking an oath, one has already taken a step backward in his spiritual growth.

True, we enter into agreements all the time (mortgages, marriage, etc.), but these are legitimate mundane contracts that are upheld by Scripture. Religious covenants between men, however, bring souls into religious bondage.

Perhaps we can chalk it up to ignorance on Warren's part. Or zeal without knowledge. Or a lapse in judgment. In any case, it is a scary proposition that so many people have placed their spiritual growth in the hands of one who does not understand, or does not take seriously, God's Word on the matter of oaths.

### Questionable Bible Versions

Warren insists that one must read from many translations and paraphrases of Scripture in order to truly understand what God is saying:

...I have intentionally varied the Bible translations used for two important reasons. First, no matter how wonderful a translation is, it has limitations. The Bible was originally written using 11,280 Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek words, but the typical English translation uses only around 6,000 words. Obviously, nuances and shades of meaning can be missed, so it is always helpful to compare translations.

Second, and even more important, 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! We think we know what a verse says because we have read it or heard it so many times. Then when we find it quoted in a book, we skim over it and miss the full meaning. Therefore I have deliberately used paraphrases in order to help you see God's truth in new, fresh ways<sup>8</sup>. (Emphasis Warren's)

There may be value in comparing Bible translations, particularly in conjunction with Hebrew and Greek word studies. But it does not follow that just any translations—and particularly

paraphrased editions—offer truth. In many cases they cloud the truth. No serious lesson can convey God's truth by using paraphrases as the primary source. Yet Warren overwhelmingly uses Bibles that are paraphrases or that incorporate a system known as "dynamic equivalency" or "thought-for-thought" rendering rather than true word-for-word translation.

*The Purpose-Driven Life* contains over 760 quotations from fifteen Bible versions (not the "nearly a thousand quotations" Warren claims). The vast majority, some 570 quotes, are from five versions: *The New Living Testament* (NLT); *The New International Version* (NIV); *The Message* (Msg); *Today's English Version* (TEV, originally *The Good News Bible*); and *The Living Bible* (LB).

The next three most quoted, a total of 151, are *The New Century Version* (NCV), *The Contemporary English Version* (CEV), and *God's Word Translation* (GWT). The balance consisted of a smattering of seven other versions: *The King James Version* (KJV); *Philips* (Ph); *The New American Standard Bible* (NASB); *The New Revised Standard Version* (NRSV); *The Amplified Bible* (Amp); *The Jerusalem Bible* (JB); and *The New Jerusalem Bible* (NJB). The last two are modern Roman Catholic versions.

Many of the verses Warren uses from the modern versions completely change the meaning of the passage from that of any reliable literal translation. Yet Warren believes that modern translations and paraphrases are preferable to the King James Bible. So much so, that he states flat out that preachers should not use the KJV at all:

Read Scripture from a newer translation. With all the wonderful translations and paraphrases available today, there is no legitimate reason for complicating the Good News with four-hundred-year-old English. Using the King James Version creates an unnecessary cultural barrier. Remember, when King James authorized the new translation it was because he wanted a contemporary version. I once saw an advertisement that claimed if King James were alive today, he'd be reading the New International Version! That's probably true. Clarity is more important than poetry<sup>9</sup>.

The King James Bible has its problems, particularly in the area where the meanings of words have changed. But it is no more poetry than is this writing. The world looks at the KJV as poetry because it doesn't want to take it seriously. Why does Warren adopt the world's understanding?

True, King James wanted the people to have the Bible in their own language, not the "King's English." It was the language spoken by the common people. Part of his motive was to undergird the strength of the Church of England of which he was the head. Even so, it was an honest translation that used the most reliable manuscripts extant at the time. Most modern versions use the Westcott-Hort Greek text, which is not the original Greek, but a consensus of only certain Greek manuscripts. And even where the Westcott-Hort texts are true to the Greek, many modern versions change the meaning to make it fit the theological persuasion of the "translators" or "paraphrasers."

As we continue we will see several instances where these modern versions either confuse the meaning of the text or

change the meaning entirely. But it is not a matter of preferring clarity over poetry; it is a matter of preferring clarity to the unvarnished truth. That unvarnished truth does not always fit the “seeker-friendly” model for church growth.

### **It All Starts with God**

Warren begins Chapter One of *The Purpose-Driven Life* with what I consider one of the most important truths relative to our existence and purpose on earth: “It’s not about you.”<sup>10</sup>

The purpose of your life is far greater than your own personal fulfillment, your peace of mind, or even your happiness. It’s far greater than your family, your career, or even your wildest dreams and ambitions. If you want to know why you were placed on this planet, you must begin with God. You were born *by* his purpose and *for* his purpose<sup>11</sup>.

Warren rightly states that focusing on ourselves will never realize our life’s purpose; we cannot discover life’s meaning by looking within ourselves or by seeking self-actualization. He eschews the efforts of New Age practitioners and pop psychology as found in self-help books, even “Christian” ones, to come to a knowledge of the truth regarding one’s purpose in life. He differentiates between being successful and fulfilling one’s life’s purpose. Unfortunately, the advice he offers is often counter to these claims. This is realized as he affirms his statements with quotes from unreliable Bible versions. In this case, as in many others, he cites one of the most unreliable para- phrases, *The Message*:

Obsession with self in these matters is a dead end; attention to God leads us out into the open, into a spacious, free life. (Romans 8:6)<sup>12</sup>

Compare this with the KJV:

For to be carnally minded is death; but to be spiritually minded is life and peace.

The difference between the two versions is painfully obvious. *The Message* turns this warning against sin into merely being concerned with one’s self-interest. It changes eternal life into a “spacious, free life” here on earth. It also changes spiritual death into a “dead end,” as if the worst that could happen is that we would be unfulfilled rather than be damned. By quoting *The Message* rather than a reliable literal translation, Warren bolsters the very self-interest he claims to be against.

The other quote in this passage is from Matthew 16:25 in *The Message*:

Self-help is no help at all. Self-sacrifice is the way, my way, to finding yourself, your true self<sup>13</sup>.

Compare this with the KJV:

For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it.

### **Perverted Versions**

Again we find a perverted version of Scripture. Jesus spoke of finding eternal life in Him, not finding our true self. He was not speaking about “self-help”; He was speaking about selfishness.

Self-help has to do with finding the solutions to problems in one’s life, whereas selfishness has to do with choosing one’s own path in life. Contrary to God’s will. Additionally, to “find oneself” is a psychological term which means to achieve self-actualization. Just the thing Warren claims to be against.

Warren states there are only two options to discover one’s purpose in life: speculation or revelation. Speculation, he says, is the world’s wisdom—“the best guess I can come up with.” Revelation is found in God’s Word<sup>14</sup>. No argument there.

Unfortunately, he clouds God’s Word with quotes from translations and paraphrases that do not convey the true meaning that an accurate translation would. Thus, in the long run, much of what he offers is the world’s wisdom masquerading as God’s revelation.

Warning against “pop psychology, success-motivation, or inspirational stories,” Warren continues to lead the reader in just that direction by again quoting from *The Message*:

It’s in Christ that we find out who we are and what we are living for: Long before we first heard of Christ and got our hopes up, he had his eye on us, had designs on us for glorious living, part of the overall purpose he is working out in everything and everyone<sup>15</sup>.

A proper understanding of this verse (Ephesians 1:11) correctly translated requires including the entire passage from Ephesians 1:10-12:

That in the dispensation of the fulness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth; even in him:

In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will:

That we should be to the praise of his glory, who first trusted in Christ. (KJV)

Nothing in God’s Word suggests we can “find out who we are.” That’s a pop psychology term—again, the very thing Warren warns against. Paul was speaking about our being predestinated to an inheritance of eternal rewards, not about finding out who we are.

In spite of Warren’s excellent choices of words in turning the reader from self to God, his purpose is defeated by wrongly handling the Word of God. One cannot convey truth by including false representations of God’s Word. And contrary to the “dynamic equivalency” (thought-for-thought) method of “translating” Scripture, there can be no accurate understanding of God’s Word if the best attempt at word-for-word translation is ignored. All that is left are the fallible thoughts of the “translators.” Anything the author has to say is rendered useless if he points his readers in the direction of tainted human reasoning passing itself off as a Bible “translation” or “paraphrase.”

### **You Are Not an Accident**

In Chapter Two Warren explains to us as if we were children that we were created by God for His purpose; we were not an

accident. This is more suited for non-believers than it is for even new believers. It is so elementary as to be without purpose otherwise. Yet he speaks as if to believers and cites Scriptures that pertain only to Israel, such as Isaiah 46:3-4 as found in *The New Century Version*:

I have carried you since you were born; I have taken care of you from your birth. Even when you are old, I will be the same. Even when your hair has turned gray, I will take care of you. I made you and will take care of you<sup>16</sup>.

Besides the fact that these verses pertain not to any individual, but to the houses of Israel and Judah, they were words of chastening, not encouragement. The full context reveals that God was telling Judah and a remnant of Israel that, in spite of their sins for which they went into captivity, He will again establish them in the land from which they had been exiled. While individual believers may trust that God will continue to carry them through adversity, these verses apply to the Israelite nations, many people of which died in their sins. God does not make such promises to non-believers—to whom this chapter and much of the book seems more suited. For just after this, Warren says,

But there is a God who made you for a reason, and your life has profound meaning! We discover that meaning and purpose only when we make God the reference point of our lives<sup>17</sup>.

True, but believers in Christ already know this. Therefore we must assume he is speaking to non-believers in the churches. No doubt there are many, but virtually all in the churches at least believe God exists in some form or another. Yet it isn't until several chapters later that Warren suggests that if anyone is not a believer in Jesus he should say the "sinner's prayer."

Following this statement, and to prove his point, he quotes *The Message* paraphrase of Romans 12:3:

The only accurate way to understand ourselves is by what God is and by what he does for us<sup>18</sup>.

This is not even close to what the real Scriptures say:

For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith. (KJV)

Remember the opening line in Chapter 1: "It's not about you." Yet by quoting *The Message* rather than an accurate translation of Romans 12:3, Warren makes it more about us ("what he [God] does for us") than about God Himself. The real Bible warns us not to think of ourselves too highly. The "bibles" Warren uses consistently place man at the center. I found this to be a problem throughout the book.

### What Drives Your Life?

Warren examines various forces that drive people's actions in life: guilt; resentment and anger; materialism; the need for approval. He contrasts these with the benefits of purpose-driven living. In the process, however, he makes some outlandish

statements, one of which substitutes the word "guilt" for "sin" regarding Cain's slaying of Abel:

...Guilt-driven people are manipulated by memories. They allow their past to control their future. They often unconsciously punish themselves by sabotaging their own success. When Cain sinned, his guilt disconnected him from God's presence, and God said, "You will be a restless wanderer on the earth." That describes most people today—wandering through life without a purpose<sup>19</sup>.

Notice the pop-psychology applied here. Rather than implore the reader who may be suffering from guilt to confess his sins, the idea is completely ignored. Instead, the reader is told that by holding onto guilt he sabotages his own success.

In the first place, people should feel guilty until they confess their sins to God. Guilt plays an important part in bringing us to repentance and asking for our Father's forgiveness, as well as forgiveness from those we have sinned against. Why is this important element in dealing with guilt not addressed?

In the second place, it was not Cain's **guilt** that disconnected him from God's presence; it was his **sin**. To substitute the word guilt for the proper word sin gives a false sense of security in remaining in sin. This error is further exacerbated by Warren's quoting of Psalm 32:1 from *The Living Bible* rather than from an accurate translation:

What happiness for those whose guilt has been forgiven!...What relief for those who have confessed their sins and God has cleared their record<sup>20</sup>.

The word that *The Living Bible* translates "guilt" is the Hebrew *pesha*, which means rebellion, sin, transgression, trespass. An accurate translation would be "Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered."

Substituting the word "guilt" for "sin" leaves the unsuspecting reader of such paraphrased versions thinking that feeling guilt is a sin in itself. Well, I suppose it *is* a "sin" to modern day purveyors of pop psychology in the churches.

Just as we find that it really is about you in virtually every aspect of Warren's writing, we find it in his dissertation on people being driven by fear:

Many people are driven by fear. Their fears may be a result of a traumatic experience, unrealistic expectations, growing up in a high-control home, or even genetic predisposition. Regardless of the cause, fear-driven people often miss great opportunities because they're afraid to venture out. Instead they play it safe, avoiding risks and trying to maintain the status quo.

Fear is a self-imposed prison that will keep you from becoming what God intends for you to be<sup>21</sup>.

Genetic predisposition? Where is this found in Scripture? It may be a psychological theory, unproven at that, but it does not merit mention in a book that alludes to being God-inspired (it will "transform your life").

All such theories pander to the self-centered person who is looking for excuses outside himself for his sins and failures in spiritual matters. And the purpose for overcoming fear is so that you may become all that God intended for you to be. So, again, it is about you.

Else why would Warren quote 1 John 4:18 from *The Message* to prove his point?

Well-formed love banishes fear. Since fear is crippling, a fearful life—fear of death, fear of judgment—is one not yet fully formed in love<sup>22</sup>.

What does an accurate translation say?

There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love. (KJV)

*The Message* goes beyond what God said. In doing so it changes the person who is not made perfect in love, to a fearful life that is not fully formed in love. The onus is taken off the individual and placed upon his imperfect life.

Warren does well in addressing those who are driven by materialism and by the need for approval. And his turning the issue toward living for God is well stated:

Without God, life has no purpose, and without purpose, life has no meaning. Without meaning, life has no significance or hope<sup>23</sup>.

But then he quotes from inaccurate paraphrased Bibles to support his position. Also, he misapplies Scripture once again by assigning Jeremiah 29:11 to the individual when, in truth, it is addressed to Israel regarding its return from the Babylonian captivity:

“I know what I am planning for you.... ‘I have good plans for you, not plans to hurt you. I will give you hope and a good future.’”<sup>24</sup>

The KJV offers a better translation, one which is better kept in context for Israel than easily misapplied to individuals:

For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the LORD, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end.

This encouragement to the nation was stated in the context of commanding them to build houses and plan to stay in Babylon for the long term. It has nothing to do with promising a better future for any individual.

### **Made to Last Forever**

Warren addresses eternal rewards for those who are faithful, which is important. Unfortunately, he gives the impression that eternity will be spent in heaven rather than on the new earth as Scripture states. This is found in his using *The Living Bible* version of Hebrews 13:14:

“This world is not our home; we are looking forward to our everlasting home in heaven.”

An accurate translation of Hebrews 13:14 is found in the KJV (and other versions):

For here have we no continuing city, but we seek one to come.

The idea that believers will spend eternity in heaven may seem a minor issue to some. That’s because most Christians believe this due to faulty teaching by their pastors. But unless we properly understand the biblical view of eternity we may find ourselves misled on other issues. We will not be able to convey to others the reality of what God truly has in store for us. One of the reasons people are reticent to turn their lives over to Christ and to live for Him on this earth is because they do not like the idea of “pie in the sky, by-and-by.” Were they told the truth, they would at least know that that idea is false. They would know that a new earth will stand for eternity, and that man was made to dwell upon the earth, not in heaven (Revelation 21).

Notwithstanding this error, the chapter (four) in which it is found is one of the better chapters in this book. At the risk of appearing heavy handed in addressing the problems with Warren’s philosophy, in the interest of space it is not possible to dwell on the good parts. Suffice it to say that it is more important to address the errors than the truths he presents simply because truth may be found in God’s Word (and some inspirational books better than Warren’s) without having to endure all the errors.

Also, the purpose of this writing is to help believers sharpen their discernment so that they will not be so easily led into subtle deceptions.

### **Roman Catholic Mysticism**

One of the problems I find in many modern teachers’ writings is their giving of credibility to those who are in serious error. Warren encourages his readers to practice meditation and contemplation a la Roman Catholic mysticism:

The classic book on learning how to develop a constant conversation with God is *Practicing the Presence of God*. It was written in the seventeenth century by Brother Lawrence, a humble cook in a French monastery. Brother Lawrence was able to turn even the most commonplace and menial tasks, like preparing meals and washing dishes, into acts of praise and communion with God. The key to friendship with God, he said, is not changing what you do, but changing *your attitude* toward what you do. What you normally do for yourself you begin doing for God, whether it is eating, bathing, working, relaxing, or taking out the trash<sup>25</sup>. (Emphasis Warren’s)

This is in the context of “Becoming a Best Friend of God.”

Does God have “best friends”? If so, it isn’t by practicing His presence (which is not possible) that one may become His “best friend.” The esoteric contemplative lifestyle of Roman Catholic monks is not where truth is found. It is a deception that results in outward piety and inward feelings of spirituality. But it has no place in the life of a true believer in Jesus.

The Holy Spirit lives within the believer to guide him into truth (if the believer will but trust God's Word and not look to men for answers to their problems and sins in life). Yet we can no more "practice" God's presence than we can call Him down from His throne in Heaven. It is presumption to think that by practicing certain exercises with all good intentions we can call Him into our presence. And that is what "practicing the presence of God" is all about. This theory has worked its way into New Age Christianity (which Warren rightfully speaks against elsewhere). Unfortunately Warren's infection by Roman Catholic mysticism has clouded his understanding. Now he passes that clouded understanding on to the gullible and uninformed Christians who trust him.

Brother Lawrence is not the only Roman Catholic mystic cited by Warren:

Practicing the presence of God is a skill, a habit you can develop. Just as musicians practice scales every day in order to play beautiful music with ease, you must force yourself to think about God at different times in your day. You must train your mind to remember God.

At first you will need to create reminders to regularly bring your thoughts back to the awareness that God is with you in that moment. Begin by placing visual reminders around you. You might post little notes that say, "God is with me and for me right now!" Benedictine monks use the hourly chimes of a clock to remind them to pause and pray "the hour prayer."<sup>26</sup>

Such statements give credibility to Roman Catholicism. This is not to denigrate the intention of monks and other Catholic mystics, but their practices are not scriptural. To point to them as examples removes the barriers in some believers' minds toward separation from ungodly spirituality. Warren further endorses Roman Catholic mystics such as St. John of the Cross and Henri Nouwen<sup>27</sup>, the latter being a Catholic priest who blended psychology with Roman Catholic mysticism. Such mysticism fits well with New Age Christianity which sees any spiritual path as valid as long as it seems to result in some form of "spiritual growth."

True believers do not need to consciously try to think of God throughout the day. It is something that comes as naturally as breathing. That's not to say that He is constantly in our conscious thoughts, but we find His presence almost palpable as we consider the things we think, do and say. The Holy Spirit brings to mind the things He would have us know. Those who think they must purposely focus on God and practice exercises to accomplish it are, at best, very immature, and at worst not true believers. They are religious people seeking euphoric experiences to validate their piety.

Many of those who tout the Roman Catholic mystics, whether they are aware of it or not, have one foot in the New Age Movement, which also touts those same mystics. Richard Foster's *Renovaré* is one such organization. (See Media Spotlight's special report, *Renovaré: Taking Leave of One's Senses*.)

### Shades Of Pantheism

One disturbing element in Warren's writing is his quote of Ephesians 4:6(b) from *The New Century Version*:

He rules everything and is everywhere and is in everything<sup>28</sup>.

This is a flat out lie from Satan. God is not in everything. That is pantheism. One would think that someone with Warren's intelligence and education would know this, particularly when he decries pantheism elsewhere in his book. Why in the world would he choose to use this version for such an important message?

Here is what it really says:

One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all. (KJV)

Yes, God in the person of the Holy Spirit dwells within the body of the true believer in Jesus (1 Corinthians 6:19). But He does not live within every aspect of His creation ("in everything").

This error alone is enough to dismiss this book and to warn people to stay away from Warren's teachings. If he cannot be trusted with such an elementary truth, how can he be trusted with so much more that he wishes to place upon the Body of Christ?

### The Good Nullified By The Bad

At the beginning of this writing I said that Warren offers some profound insights into God's Word. Unfortunately he also offers some profoundly poor surmising. In the following case it has to do with "friendship with God":

Friends share secrets, and God will share his secrets with you if you develop the habit of thinking about his Word throughout the day. God told Abraham his secrets, and he did the same with Daniel, Paul, the disciples, and other friends.

When you read your Bible or hear a sermon or listen to a tape, don't just forget it and walk away. Develop the practice of reviewing the truth in your mind, thinking about it over and over. The more time you spend reviewing what God has said, the more you will understand the "secrets" of this life that most people miss. The Bible says, "Friendship with God is reserved for those who reverence him. With them alone he shares the secrets of his promises."<sup>29</sup>

This verse is taken from Psalm 25:14 in *The Living Bible*. An accurate translation says something different:

The secret of the LORD is with them that fear him; and he will shew them his covenant. (KJV)

*The Living Bible* changes fear of God to reverence and friendship with God. Nowhere does the "positive" approach to God's Word suggest that we should fear God. Although the word is most often used for fear in the sense of terror, to Warren and other "modernist teachers" even its most benign meaning—that of "reverential awe"—would be "negative" and may repulse some seekers. Better to think of God as a friend (which He is, and more—a Father), than to think He should be feared (as a Father).

What secrets does God have that He has not revealed in His Word? It's true that He does reveal certain things to certain people at certain times (prophecy), but there are no guarantees that the more one meditates upon God's Word, let alone

sermons and tapes, one will be privy to “secrets” outside of what He clearly states in His Word. Warren’s statement assumes (or at least gives the impression) that sermons and tapes carry the same spiritual anointing as Scripture. New believers might come to expect that everything they hear in a sermon or on a tape is the truth. Some things I’ve heard in sermons and on tape are better left forgotten.

### All For the Church

It is to be expected that Warren, a pastor of a megachurch, would see things through the eyes of establishment religion—the clergy-laity model. He urges his readers to be supportive of their church and pastors, and to avoid what he calls “criticism.” He leaves no room for the reality, or even suggests, that believers often have legitimate concerns about teachings and practices in their churches. Rather than encouraging us to verify from Scripture the truth or falsity of what transpires, he encourages us to “Focus on what we have in common, not our differences.”<sup>30</sup>

The context is to work together regardless of personality differences, backgrounds, races and preferences, and we must agree. However, nowhere does he encourage his readers to “test the spirits,” to be as the noble Bereans who consulted God’s Word to see if what they were told is true. For a book that purports to lead believers into spiritual maturity, this would seem to be an essential element to the equation. It is never mentioned. Rather, the idea is given that unity is of paramount importance within the churches. Yet what can we expect from one whose ecumenical bent is so obvious in his glowing endorsements of Roman Catholic mystics?

So much does Warren wish for unity that it is mandatory for all members of Saddleback Church to sign a covenant that includes a promise to protect the unity of the fellowship.<sup>31</sup> This is a powerful antidote against scrutiny. It places unity above doctrine and forbids anyone from openly challenging what the pastors say. They may be able to speak privately to the pastors, but they would be breaking their covenant (oath) by taking any serious errors before the congregation. Serious error tends to divide, not unify. Our unity must be based upon sound doctrine as well as love for one another:

Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them.

For they that are such serve not our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly; and by good words and fair speeches deceive the hearts of the simple. (Romans 16:17-18)

To overlook sound doctrine is not love; it is cowardice. But be careful! We are warned by Warren that dissent may well be motivated by pride:

Anytime you feel you are not learning anything from a sermon or a Bible teacher, you should check your attitude, especially for pride, because God can speak through even the most boring teacher when you are humble and receptive<sup>32</sup>.

True. But where is the flip side? Could it be that many believers are not learning anything from sermons and some Bible teachers because they aren’t being taught anything of substance?

In today’s pulpits, how much time is given to solid teaching on God’s Word from a *reliable* translation, as opposed to jokes, anecdotes, personal opinion and other non-essentials? I suggest believers take a stop watch and note the percentages. They may be shocked to find that the time spent in the pew is largely wasted.

In Chapter 26, “Growing Through Temptation,” Warren offers much good advice on dealing with temptation. However, he makes a serious error with this statement:

Step three is *deception*. Satan is incapable of telling the truth and is called “*the Father of lies*.” Anything he tells you will be untrue or just half-true. Satan offers his lie to replace what God has already said in his Word.<sup>33</sup> (Emphasis Warren’s)

Satan is quite capable of telling the truth, at least for the short term, even with the exclusion of lies or half-truths attached. Many people have been sucked into deceptions by hearing truths that can stand alone, yet at a later time are subordinated to deceptive teachings.

Satan can be very “orthodox” in deceiving people into accepting religious institutions as God-ordained. The greatest deceptions contain the greatest amount of truth. To say that Satan is *incapable* of telling the truth is a poor approach at best. It would have been better had Warren said that Satan is very adept at telling the truth in order to lead into deception.

In view of such errors, it is disconcerting that Warren’s books have tremendous impact on millions of lives. I point these things out only so those who trust Warren’s messages may have a better understanding and be able to avoid the errors they contain.

### Psychological overtones

Warren relies heavily on psychological integrationism. His church incorporates multi-step programs based on the Alcoholics Anonymous model to deal with various sins that are treated as addictions. One program it developed is called Celebrate Recovery and has been channeled out to many churches worldwide.

The psychological model is evident in several areas in his books. His calling Samson “codependent”<sup>34</sup> overreaches the truth of Samson’s problems, as does his saying that Gideon had “low self-esteem and deep insecurities.”<sup>35</sup>

Warren also touts the four-temperaments myth:

The Bible gives us plenty of proof that God uses all types of personalities. Peter was a *sanguine*. Paul was a *choleric*. Jeremiah was a *melancholy*. When you look at the different personality differences in the twelve disciples, it’s easy to see why they sometimes had interpersonal conflict.<sup>36</sup> (Emphasis Warren’s)

The four temperaments theory originated in ancient myths and occult practices based on the zodiac. The *Encyclopedia of Psychology* says:

Though the shifting patterns in the sky were first studied for the sake of finding portents of events that would affect the life of the group, a rationale for the relationship between personal traits and time of birth began to evolve well before the beginning of the Christian era. Central to astrological views of personality is the



system of 12 patterns or types that correspond to the 12 signs of the zodiac. The 12 types may be viewed as including three modes of expression of each of the four elements noted by Empedocles, as there are said to be three air signs, three earth signs, three fire signs, and three water signs. This typology has enjoyed some popularity for over 2000 years.<sup>37</sup>

(For more information, see Media Spotlight's *Four Temperaments: Astrology & Personality Testing*, and *Psychology: Science or Religion*.)

Warren's psychological bent is sprinkled throughout his book. The above are just a few examples.

He is also careful to place the feminine appellations in several situations where gender neutrality is evident. This panders to the feminist agenda to strip the male of preeminence, contrary to the scriptural model. Perhaps this is why Warren uses several "gender-neutral" versions of the Bible to such great extent. Replacing "him" "he" or "his" with "person" or other neutral terms is the modern way of denigrating the male who was created in the image of God, and out of whom the woman was taken. It's a shame Warren has to acquiesce to this foolishness.

Sadly, Warren's degree of deference toward women is lacking toward God and Jesus in his use of the lower case for the pronouns "he," "him," and "his" which counters centuries of Christian tradition. But this is in keeping with most of the modern Bible versions he quotes.<sup>38</sup>

In general, I found that Warren is inconsistent. On the one hand he says that everything is about God, not about us. On the other hand, many of the positions he takes are positive affirmations of what he believes is man's intrinsic worth. In other words, God does everything for us because we're worth it:

### **You were planned for God's pleasure.**

The moment you were born into the world, God was there as an unseen witness, smiling at your birth. He wanted you alive, and your arrival gave him great pleasure. God did not need to create you, but he chose to create you for his own enjoyment. You exist for his benefit, his glory, his purpose, and his delight.

Bringing enjoyment to God, living for his pleasure, is the first purpose of your life. When you fully understand this truth, you will never again have a problem with feeling insignificant. *It proves your worth.* If you are that important to God, and he considers you valuable enough to keep with him for eternity, what greater significance could you have<sup>39</sup>? (Emphasis ours)

We don't argue with the first position—that everything is about God; much of what Warren says is absolutely true. But his approach to those truths makes them of no effect. It says that we should seek to please God in order to receive everything that God has for us, rather than because He is worthy of our worship.

### **Circumstances vs. The Bible**

Warren states that "God depends more on circumstances to make us like Jesus than he depends on our reading the Bible."<sup>40</sup>

But we cannot know what God wants of us through circumstances unless we first learn what He wants of us from reading His Word. The same circumstances in life affect believers and non-believers alike (Matthew 5:45). Only those who know God's will can conform their lives to His will.

But the placing of Scripture second to experience fits into the belief that God doesn't really expect us to be perfect:

I must choose to be honest with God. The first building block of a deeper friendship with God is complete honesty—about your faults and feelings. God doesn't expect you to be perfect, but he does insist on complete honesty.<sup>41</sup>

"Yes, has God said..."? What does Jesus tell us?

Therefore, you be perfect, even as your Father who is in Heaven is perfect. (Matthew 5:48)

Notice that Jesus tells us to be as perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect.

Does "perfect" mean "perfected"? No. We will not be perfected until we are resurrected in our sinless bodies. But there are many Scriptures that tell us of the importance of being perfect in our relationship with our heavenly Father. In his letter to the Ephesians Paul defines what perfection is:

And he gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, until we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ. (Ephesians 4:11-32)

If we will do these things we will be perfect before God. Is this impossible? Of course not, or else Jesus would never have told us to be perfect.

But rather than strive to be perfect by the biblical definition, Warren tells us that we cannot expect to be perfect. All God really wants of us is honesty. And honesty means telling God what we think of him whether good or bad:

It is likely that you need to confess some hidden anger and resentment at God for certain areas of your life where you have felt cheated or disappointed. Until we mature enough to understand that God uses everything for good in our lives, we harbor resentment toward God over our appearance, background, unanswered prayers, past hurts, and other things we would change if we were God.<sup>42</sup>

Warren does go on to explain that we must choose to obey God in faith and trust Him to do what He says He will do even if we don't understand it. But just giving the idea that living perfect before God is not what He expects, contrary to His Word, combined with the idea that we should complain to God about His actions, does not result in maturity, but in excusing oneself for one's imperfections and sins.

Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus? (Romans 9:20)

Scripture tells us not to reply against God. Rick Warren tells us to do so.

Scripture tells us to be perfect. Rick Warren tells us it isn't important to be perfect.

Who are we to believe?

It is just such unscriptural advice permeating Warren's work that renders it of little value. Yes, God may well use the truthful elements to work His will in one's life while blinding one to the untruthful elements. But this is given as a warning to those who wish to wholeheartedly trust any man with their spiritual lives.

Test the spirits to see if they are of God or not (1 John 4:1).

### **Movements Come And Go**

In saying all this, I realize nonetheless that the Saddleback phenomenon is going to continue to increase in its influence until something else comes along to take its place. It seems as if every few years or so, some new phenomenon arises within the churches, promising the cure for the malaise that appears to exist within Christianity. We have seen the rise and decline of Promise Keepers, the Kansas City Prophets, the Toronto Blessing, the Brownsville Revival, the Vineyard Movement, the charismatic revival, Renovaré, and others, all carrying the promise that God was doing something "new." If we didn't get on the bandwagon we were sure to be left behind as God changed the world and the "church" through these various revelations of His power.

Some of these phenomena have been more esoteric than others; some more cerebral; some more emotional. All have declined in the Christian media's coverage as their luster wore off and other movements took their place. Today, Rick Warren's purpose-driven philosophy is the latest craze. But it, like all the others, is not a move of God. It is a move of man which, like all the others, incorporates human wisdom with Scripture (or poor facsimiles of Scripture) in an attempt to achieve a hybrid Christianity that appeals to the ego. It may seem very spiritual; it may seem very scriptural (if one accepts the polluted Bible versions Warren uses); it may seem very godly. But with all the truth it presents come many worldly concepts that run counter to God's Word. This is even recognized by some pastors who use Warren's system. But what appeals to them is the bolstering of the clergy-driven religious establishment. This is the deep deception that has characterized all these movements within Christianity. The mother of these harlots is Roman Catholicism. It is no wonder that her daughters are beginning to once again adopt her religious trappings.

The neo-evangelical push for unity with Rome finds fertile ground in Rick Warren's philosophy. And no wonder, considering that all the "men of God" he touts have been ecumenical to the core.

Now, in view of Warren's claim that his book, *The Purpose-Driven Life*, will transform people's lives, those who have done his exercises might look back after one or two years and see if that is what actually happened. Or is their growth or lack thereof

more the result of normal growth in the faith through Scripture study, prayer, fellowship and self-control? How many lives are truly transformed in relation to the number who have read his book? So far the condition overall of the churches and Christians in general are no different from when he started. I suppose we'll have to wait and see. In the meantime, his book will continue to sell like hotcakes.

### **THE PURPOSE-DRIVEN CHURCH**

Rick Warren's philosophy of church life and church growth were cemented early in his young adult life through the influence of W.A. Criswell, the late pastor at Dallas First Baptist Church. Criswell is perhaps the most well-known Baptist pastor for the modern era. Warren says of Criswell:

I believe W.A. Criswell is the greatest American pastor of the twentieth century. He pastored at First Baptist for fifty years, wrote fifty-three books, and developed the most widely copied church model of this century. Not only was he a powerful preacher and leader, he was an organizational genius. Most people think of tradition when they think of Criswell, but actually his ministry was incredibly innovative. It only became known as traditional after everyone copied him!<sup>43</sup>

It was while hearing Criswell speak at a conference in 1973 that then nineteen-year-old Rick Warren believed God was calling him to be a pastor:

As I listened to this great man of God preach, God spoke personally to me and made it very clear that he was calling me to be a pastor. Then and there, I promised God I'd give my entire life to pastoring a single church if that was his will for me.<sup>44</sup>

After the service, Warren stood in line to shake hands with Dr. Criswell. He did not expect what happened next:

Criswell looked at me with kind, loving eyes and said, quite emphatically, "Young man, I feel led to lay hands on you and pray for you!" Without delay he placed his hands on my head and prayed these words that I will never forget: "Father, I ask that you give this young preacher a double portion of your Spirit. May the church he pastors grow to twice the size of the Dallas church. Bless him greatly, O Lord."<sup>45</sup>

This is quite remarkable, considering that the only time Scripture mentions a "double portion" of the Holy Spirit is in reference to Elisha requesting from Elijah that he grant a double portion of his spirit to him (2 Kings 2:9-13). Elijah replied that if Elisha saw him taken up in God's chariot he would receive what he asked for, and it came to pass.

The question comes to mind, what is a double portion of the Holy Spirit? The answer is that, prior to Jesus' ascension and His conferring the Holy Spirit upon all believers, God's Spirit worked only through certain men anointed as prophets. Some prophets had more of His anointing than others had. They were used in

different ways with varying degrees of power. Elisha wanted twice as much power as Elijah had—as a prophet.

It's true that God does anoint certain people for specific ministries, but all believers are indwelt by the Holy Spirit and commissioned to minister.

Can we legitimately ask our Father for more of His Holy Spirit than we have? There is no indication that this is even a possibility today, particularly when a man such as Criswell, operating in an unscriptural capacity as a professional clergyman, makes such a request of God. Criswell's endorsement of the pope, Robert Schuller, Norman Vincent Peale, and others of highly questionable theology disqualified him as a leader in the Body of Christ no matter the numbers of people he has impacted.

Schuller's Christian humanism is well-known. His mentor was Norman Vincent Peale, a 33° Mason who found great enlightenment by visiting a particular Shinto shrine.

Can we trust a pastor who commends men whose theology is so blatantly faulty—men who use the name of Jesus to further their secular philosophies?

Criswell had a tremendous impact on the role of Southern Baptist pastors. Dr. Rick McClatchy and Dr. Bruce Prescott, on faculty at Mercer University, a Baptist university, have stated that the role of the pastor has changed significantly from that originally held by the SBC.

In the late 1970s two men, Paige Patterson and Paul Pressler, devised a plan to take over the Southern Baptist Convention and change its direction. Their strategy inserted an alien winner-take-all system of power politics into the life of our denomination....

In traditional Baptist thought all members of the church were seen as equal ministers with different spiritual gifts—a doctrine referred to as the priesthood of believers. The role of the pastor in this context was to preach and teach, to train the congregation for service, to care for the needs of the congregation, and to provide administrative coordination to the work of the church. Pastors were viewed as servants of the church.

The Patterson-Pressler coalition insists that the pastor is the unquestioned ruler of the church. W. A. Criswell said, "Lay leadership of the church is unbiblical when it weakens the pastor's authority as ruler of the church... a laity-led church will be a weak church anywhere on God's earth. The pastor is ruler of the church." In 1988 the Southern Baptist Convention passed a resolution affirming that the pastor was the ruler of the church.

This new emphasis on pastoral authority marks a departure from the traditional Baptist teaching on the priesthood of every believer.<sup>46</sup>

As a believer in the absolute authority of the pastor, Criswell ruled Dallas First Baptist Church with a firm hand. His legacy has passed on to pastors of many denominations who view their office as authoritarian rather than servant-oriented. Jerry Falwell, who has teamed with Rick Warren in a Purpose-Driven Church

Sminar, once called Criswell "the Protestant Pope of this generation."<sup>47</sup>

As we think about it, Rick Warren does seem to have a double portion of that same clergy spirit which Criswell laid hands on him to receive. He operates more as a pastors' pastor than as one shepherd among others in the flock of a biblical local assembly. His book, *The Purpose-Driven Church*, was written primarily for pastors:

This book is written for anyone interested in helping his or her church grow, but because I am a pastor, my writing style is naturally slanted from a pastor's perspective to other pastors. I come from a long line of pastors. My great-grandfather was converted through Charles Spurgeon's historic ministry in London and came to the United States as a pioneer circuit-riding pastor.

Both my father and my father-in-law have been pastors. Both recently celebrated their fiftieth anniversaries in ministry. My sister is married to a pastor, and I spent part of my childhood growing up on a seminary campus where my father served on staff. So I have a deep love for pastors. I love being around them. I hurt with them when they hurt. I believe they are the most under-rated leaders in our society.<sup>48</sup>

Pastors from virtually every denomination attend Warren's seminars, and more pastors have sat at his feet than have regular congregants. He considers pastors the most strategic change agents to deal with the problems in society.<sup>49</sup>

The clergy-laity system is essential to the purpose-driven church model. That system demands allegiance to the pastor as the sole authority, and to his agenda. It is the doctrine of the Nicolaitans which Jesus twice said He hates (Revelation 2:6, 15).

### **The Start of Saddleback**

In choosing a site for his church, Warren wanted to "go someplace where most of my seminary buddies were unwilling to go."<sup>50</sup>

Where might that be? Africa, Asia, Somalia? The Middle East? Where would seminarians be unwilling to go? Certainly not sunny Southern California—and in prosperous Orange County, at that!

But that's where Warren knew God wanted him to be *because of a lack of Bible churches there*:

One afternoon I discovered that the Saddleback Valley, in Orange County, southern California, was the fastest growing area in the fastest-growing county in the United States during the decade of the 1970s. This fact grabbed me by the throat and made my heart start racing. I knew that wherever new communities were being started at such a fast pace there would also be a need for new churches.

As I sat there in the dusty, dimly lit basement of that university library, I heard God speak clearly to me: "That's where I want you to plant a church!" My whole body began to tingle with excitement, and tears welled up in my eyes. I had heard from God<sup>51</sup>.

Lack of an assembly in a given area is good reason to plant one there. However, there were already many large churches in the Saddleback area:

I had not been in southern California very long before I realized it was an area that already had many strong, Bible-believing churches. Some of the best-known pastors in America ministered within driving distance of our new church. On any Sunday you could go hear Chuck Swindoll, Chuck Smith, Robert Schuller, John MacArthur, E.V. Hill, John Wimber, Jack Hayford, Lloyd Ogilvie, Charles Blake, Greg Laurie, Ray Ortlund, or John Huffman. If you timed your arrival right, you could hear two or three of these guys on the same Sunday morning. And most of them could be heard on the radio or TV in southern California.

In addition, there were at least two dozen solid Bible-teaching churches in the Saddleback Valley when I arrived.<sup>52</sup>

So, contrary to the reason Warren felt God call him to southern California, there really wasn't a need for him. But rather than join a work in progress, he decided that his church would be for the unchurched:

I decided that we would make no effort at all to attract Christians from other churches to Saddleback. We would not even borrow workers from other area churches to start Saddleback. Since I felt called to reach unbelievers, I determined to begin with unbelievers, rather than with a core of committed Christians. This was not the way all the books on church starting said to do it, but I felt certain that it was what God was calling us to do. Our focus would be limited to reaching the unchurched for Christ, people who for one reason or another did not attend any existing church.<sup>53</sup>

Thus began Warren's "seeker-sensitive" approach to ministry. By polling households in his community he found out what people wanted and expected in a church.

Warren got the idea of polling residents from Robert Schuller's book, *Your Church Has Real Possibilities*. (Glendale, CA: Regal Books, 1974). But he decided that Schuller's questions needed to be rephrased for his purposes:

...I began Saddleback by going door-to-door for twelve weeks and surveying the unchurched in my area. Six years earlier I had read Robert Schuller's book *Your Church Has Real Possibilities*, which told how he had gone door-to-door in 1955 and asked hundreds of people, "Why don't you go to church?" and "What do you want in a church?" I thought this was a great idea but felt the questions needed to be rephrased for the more skeptical 1980s.<sup>54</sup>

One question Warren asked is, "Are you actively attending any church?"

If they said yes, I thanked them and moved on to the next home. I didn't bother asking the other three questions because I didn't want to color the survey with believers' opinions. Notice that I didn't ask, "Are you a member?" Many people who haven't been inside a church for twenty years still claim membership in some church.<sup>55</sup>

Warren seems to assume that if they attend a church they are believers. But what if the people attend a Catholic church, or a Mormon stake house, or a Watchtower Society kingdom hall, or any number of churches whose doctrines seriously impair a right relationship with the true God of the Bible?

This is a weakness that is apparent throughout Warren's writings: he assumes that church people are believers. If he doesn't assume such, he doesn't make it evident.

The fact that many people are "unchurched," yet willing to go to a church that meets their perceived needs indicates that they are at best nominal Christians. People of other religious belief systems are not interested in going to a church. Most are committed to their synagogues, temples, mosques, stake houses, kingdom halls or whatever.

### **The Life Development Process**

Based upon the seeker-sensitive approach, Warren devised a program to walk the fledgling members through a growth process called "The Life Development Process." This consists of four classes which every prospective member is required to attend. It is based on a model of running the bases. The 100 Level Classes involve "Knowing Christ" on the way to First Base (Committed to Membership). The 200 Level Classes involve "Growing in Christ" on the way to Second Base (Committed to Maturity). The 300 Level Classes involve "Serving Christ" on the way to Third Base (Committed to Ministry). The 400 Level Classes involve "Sharing Christ" on the way to Home Plate (Committed to Missions).<sup>56</sup>

It doesn't matter how mature a believer in Christ may be; everyone starts on the way to first base in the purpose-driven church, relearning again the rudiments of the faith.

This is the best way in which an organization can assure that everyone thinks the same and is in total agreement with the leadership. It assumes, of course, that the leadership is in total conformity to Scripture on all issues.

Some would ask if there is a better way for new believers to mature in the faith. Well, there must be other ways, because before Rick Warren came along many brethren have been brought to maturity without the Life Development Process.

I was asked, if not in an institutional church setting, how ministering to new and immature believers could be done in a small house assembly. My answer was that, once we are sure that a new or immature believer has joined us we would continue to systematically study the Word together. In the process he will become mature without having to sign covenants and go through classroom settings, led by the nose. We trust that the Holy Spirit in him would lead him into all truth. We prefer a Holy Spirit-driven assembly rather than a purpose-driven "church."

The new believer would also be taught how to test what he hears— something that is sorely lacking in the churches.

## Membership Covenant or Bible?

Covenants are an important part of the purpose-driven church model. Virtually every aspect of purpose-driven ministry carries with it the need to agree to a covenant, which may even supercede Scripture.

Warren states that members are held to a different standard than are non-believing service attendees:

We apply different standards of conduct to members and attenders. Members of our church are expected to abide by the lifestyle guidelines of our membership covenant. Those who engage in immoral activities are subject to church discipline. Unbelievers in the crowd are not subject to church discipline because they are not actually a part of our church family.<sup>57</sup>

Although Saddleback's membership covenant may include some biblical aspects, not everything in it is found in God's Word. Nor is everything in God's Word included in the covenant. Should believers not be held to the Scriptures rather than to a church covenant?

Warren has proven himself very adept at organization and the ability to implement his goals. Those goals for the churches are predicated upon what he calls the "Five Purposes" of the church: 1) Love the Lord with all your heart; 2) Love your neighbor as yourself; 3) Go and make disciples; 4) Baptizing them; 5) Teaching them to obey.

Purpose #1 is described as *worship*. "The church exists to worship God,"<sup>58</sup> which includes celebration of His presence by magnifying the Lord and exalting his name through music, and other means of verbal and physical expression.

Purpose #2 is *ministry*, demonstrating God's love to others by meeting their needs and healing their hurts in the name of Jesus.<sup>59</sup>

Purpose #3 is *evangelism* for both bringing the lost to Christ and helping the church to grow.<sup>60</sup>

Purpose #4 is *baptizing* for identification with the body of Christ, and as a symbol of salvation and fellowship.<sup>61</sup>

Purpose #5 is *discipleship*—helping people become more like Christ.<sup>62</sup>

Warren is correct in delineating these purposes for the Body of Christ. To accomplish them, he says, the church must be healthy. He also states that most churches may excel in one or two of the purposes, but fail to excel in all the purposes. He presents Saddleback Church as the example of a church that fulfills all these purposes. In fact, when advertising his new church to the Saddleback residents, he made the following claim:

At last! A new church for those who've given up on traditional church services.<sup>63</sup>

What an affront to the other churches. In truth, however, Saddleback's services are as traditional as any other church's services. Except that the content is dumbed down so as not to offend the sensitive seeker.

Warren is correct that most churches fail to implement all five purposes. But is Saddleback the model to follow?

## Is Growth The Issue?

I found that Warren correctly states many things to do and not to do. Yet Saddleback does not always measure up to his criteria.

For example, he often states that growth should not be the goal of the church; rather, healthy ministry of the five purposes should be the goal. Yet just as often he states how implementing his agenda will cause the churches to grow. It isn't just that growth will be a by-product of good ministry, but that growth should be the goal of good ministry. And if a church isn't growing according to the Saddleback model, then it must be unhealthy.

Warren states that he has read the New Testament "over and over, studying it with 'church-growth eyes.'"<sup>64</sup> Everything Saddleback Church does is geared toward growth. If a church isn't growing it is considered unhealthy, possibly diseased.<sup>65</sup> Conversely, if a church is growing, it is an indication that it is healthy.

Is this the iron-clad rule that Warren implies it to be? If so, does it apply then to Mormonism, which is the fastest growing church in America? Is Islam "healthy" because it is the fastest growing religion in the world?

This seems to be what drives Warren toward his focus on church growth.

## Long-term Pastors = Health

One thing that impressed Warren through his research on church growth was something he says he already knew from W.A. Criswell's ministry:

...Healthy, large churches are led by pastors who have been there a long time. I found dozens of examples. A long pastorate does not guarantee a church will grow, but changing pastors every few years guarantees a church won't grow.<sup>66</sup>

The pastor is likened to the daddy in a family:

Can you imagine what the kids would be like in a family where they got a new daddy every two or three years? They would most likely have serious emotional problems. In the same way, the longevity of the leadership is a critical factor for the health and growth of a church family.<sup>67</sup>

Well, we're not kids. And God, not the pastor, is our Father. In truth, a long-term pastor will be the only voice that many in the church may hear. Is that more healthy than a plurality of elders teaching, ministering and working together? If one leaves it won't be because he was reassigned by his denominational headquarters or found greener pastures elsewhere; it will be because God moves him. But the others will be left to continue to minister, and new elders will be added as time progresses.

What is unhealthy is the clergy-oriented organization that relies almost exclusively on the belief system into which the pastor was educated.

## Programs vs. Process

Warren says he's against programs:

Instead of trying to grow a church with programs, focus on growing people with a process. This concept is

the heart of being a purpose-driven church. If you will set up a process for developing disciples and stick with it, your church's growth will be healthy, balanced, and consistent. Benjamin Disraeli once observed that "constancy to purpose is the secret of success."

Our process for implementing the purposes of God involves four steps: We bring people in, build them up, train them, and send them out. We bring them in as members, we build them up to maturity, we train them for ministry, and we send them out on mission, magnifying the Lord in the process. That's it! This is our total focus at Saddleback. We don't do anything else.<sup>68</sup>

Sounds good. But Saddleback is replete with programs. They may be designed to implement the process, but they are programs nonetheless. Those programs are not always scriptural, often incorporating Jungian psychology for the purpose of "maturing" the people.<sup>69</sup>

Saddleback's "Celebrate Recovery" program is exported to myriad churches and is based on the Alcoholics Anonymous 12-step recovery process. Such programs are unscriptural, but have become so popular that most Christians see no problem with having them in their churches.

Saddleback Church's small-group program is peer-oriented, with people being segregated according to age and other factors. This effectively leaves those small groups devoid of any scriptural basis. It also cements the idea that "the church" is the clergy-led umbrella institution to which they owe their allegiance, rather than owing their allegiance to the brethren at large.

A biblical assembly is not a clergy-oriented institution with a pulpit "ministry." It is a family of believers who minister together according to the gifts granted by the Father through the Holy Spirit. It includes all ages and people of varying interests and gifts.

Peer-oriented small groups are programs designed to keep these elements segregated and dependent upon the clergy for any serious teaching, instruction and discipline. Thus, these peer groups usually end up being "facilitated" by unqualified men (and women) who, lacking biblical understanding, use encounter group techniques. The process is not Holy Spirit-led, Bible-centered ministry as much as it is a feel-good attempt to alleviate pain and make people feel loved and accepted.

In speaking with people who have been a part of Saddleback's small-group "ministry" I've found that this is typical of the way these peer groups function.

As much as Warren speaks against programs, his church incorporates programs galore.

Virtually all of Saddleback's support groups are programs that incorporate psychological techniques designed for the specific purposes of the groups. Somehow, biblical ministry alone is insufficient to address all these and other problems of the soul within the context of the local assembly of believers. They must be handled in segregated peer groups. How did the first-century believers ever minister effectively before Carl Jung and his demon-spirit guide Philemon came on the scene?

Such programs tell us that people can be ministered to effectively only if they can share their hurts, fears, pain and addictions with people of like hurts, fears, and addictions. This is not how the Lord formed His Body. But today's "church" meeting becomes the only forum in which the diverse gifts He gave may be ministered. However, they are restricted to the approved clergy or clergy-appointed "ministers." This is contrary to Scripture:

How is it then, brethren? when you come together, each of you has a psalm, has a doctrine, has a language, has a revelation, has an interpretation. Let all things be done unto edifying. (1 Corinthians 14:26)

And he gave some as apostles; and some as prophets; and some as evangelists; and some as pastors and teachers for the edifying of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, until we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we henceforth no longer children, tossed back and forth, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive. (Ephesians 4:11-14)

Warren delineates five purposes for the churches. Could there be a sixth purpose virtually ignored in his philosophy—to equip the brethren to discern truth from error? To protect the brethren from all the satanic winds of doctrine that permeate the Christian churches and Christian media?

How did such an important element get left off the purpose-driven agenda? I would hate to think that it's because deception is rampant in the psychology-based purpose-driven church, or that warning against such is not "positive" enough for the "seekers."

Or are the leaders at Saddleback so immature themselves that they cannot discern this satanic deception? In either case, they disqualify themselves for teaching the Body of Christ about maturity in the faith.

But one thing I will say: *The Purpose-Driven Church* is an excellent book for pastors and institutional organizations called "churches" to help themselves grow. The biblical model for the gathering of believers is different: a plurality of elders—not a professional clergy class; the priesthood of all believers—not seminary-trained men and women who place themselves between the people and our Father for direction in their lives; a family of believers, all of whom minister to one another without distinction of specific "needs"—not an evangelistic center where everyone is welcome.

Evangelism should be done outside the Body assembly. If unbelievers are brought in they may be ministered to, certainly. But the purpose of the assembly of believers is for the building up of the believers, not to meet the needs of "seekers."

Although Warren comes close, he misses this point in his book:

It is not the church's task to give people whatever they want or even need. But the fastest way to build a bridge to the unchurched is to express interest in them and show that you understand the problems they are facing. Felt needs, whether real or imaginary, are a starting point for expressing love to people.<sup>70</sup>

But, again, the practice at Saddleback has been to cater to felt needs. This is borne out by the "target" demographic Warren devised—Saddleback Sam.

### Demographic Analysis

Saddleback Sam is well educated; likes contemporary music; likes his job, likes where he lives; holds health and fitness as high priorities for himself and his family; would rather be in a large group than a small one; is skeptical of "organized religion"; thinks he is enjoying life more than he did five years ago; is self-satisfied, even smug, about his station in life; prefers the casual and informal over the formal; is overextended in both time and money.<sup>71</sup>

By developing this demographic, Saddleback reveals that it does, indeed, cater to the felt needs of the community. Rather than proclaim the unadulterated Word of God, Saddleback crafts its message so as not to offend—to cater to the demographic model for its community.

This isn't to say that we should not be aware of the thinking in our community. But God's Word is not something to bargain with. It is an offense to those who are perishing. Watering it down and processing the people through a four-step program may result in some true conversions. But those conversions would have been effected anyway. Because true faith always has, and always will, come by hearing a word about Christ Jesus (Romans 10:17). Through humanistic processes, outward changes may result as people become religious (much as Mormons and other clean living non-believers or cult members). But the true, life-changing conversion from sinner to saint comes only by the Word of God proclaimed without compromise.

In the purpose-driven church, effective ministry is more about style than substance. Defining faithfulness, Warren states that it is necessary to conform the style of ministry to the needs of the people being ministered to:

How do *you* define faithfulness? Are you being faithful to God's Word if you insist on communicating it in an outdated style? Are you being faithful if you insist on doing ministry in a way that is *comfortable* for you, even though it doesn't produce any fruit? Are you being faithful to Christ if you value man-made traditions more than reaching people for him? I contend that when a church continues to use methods that no longer work, it is being unfaithful to Christ!

Sadly, there are many churches today who are completely orthodox in their beliefs but are still unfaithful to Christ because they refuse to change programs, methods, styles of worship, buildings, or even locations in order to reach a lost world for Christ. Vance Havner used to say,

"A church can be straight as a gun barrel doctrinally and just as empty spiritually." We must be willing to say, with unreserved commitment to our Lord and Savior, "We'll do *whatever it takes* to reach people for Christ."<sup>72</sup> (Emphasis Warren's)

Who can argue with that? Except that in practice, Saddleback compromises God's Word by including psychology-based service in meeting people's needs. It's one thing to change one's style; it's another to change it to include ungodly elements.

### Storytelling

Warren believes that the message from the pulpit must be relevant to people's lives—something practical they can take with them. This isn't a bad idea, but often people need to hear what they need to hear, regardless of whether or not they consider it practical for themselves personally. In keeping with his belief, Warren's style is to tell stories because he believes Jesus did it to make the truth clear to people:

Jesus captured the interest of large crowds with techniques that you and I can use. First, he told stories to make a point. Jesus was a master storyteller. He would say, "Hey, did you hear the one about..." and then tell a parable in order to teach a truth. In fact, the Bible shows that storytelling was Jesus' favorite technique when speaking to the crowd. "Jesus spoke all these things to the crowd in parables; he did not say anything to them without using a parable" (Matt. 13:34). Somehow preachers forget that the Bible is essentially a book of stories. That is how God has chosen to communicate his Word to human beings.<sup>73</sup>

But what else does Matthew say?

And the disciples came, and said to Him, "Why do You speak to them in parables?"

He answered and said to them, "Because it is given to you to know the mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven, but it is not given to them.

"For whoever has, to him shall be given, and he shall have more abundance. But whoever has not, from him shall be taken away even that he has.

"Therefore speak I to them in parables, because looking, they do not see, and listening, they do not hear, nor do they understand.

"And in them is fulfilled the Isaiah's prophecy which says, 'By listening you will hear, and will not understand; and looking you will see, and will not perceive, for this people's heart has grown gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and they have closed their eyes lest at any time they would see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and would understand with their heart, and would be converted, and I would heal them.'" (Matthew 13:10-15)

Jesus spoke in parables so that the crowd would *not* understand. These were not "stories." The mysteries of the Kingdom are for those whose hearts are right before God. But even His disciples needed to have the parables explained. They did not understand any of them without Jesus telling them what they meant.

How sad that such an elementary truth is lost to a man of Warren's stature among the churches!

Jesus taught in such a way as to alienate even "those who believed" (John 8:30-59). Read these verses carefully and you will see that Warren's take on Jesus' ministry is faulty. By the time Jesus finished with the hard truths, they were ready to kill him:

Then they picked up stones to cast at Him, but Jesus hid Himself, and went out of the temple, going through their midst, and so passed by. (John 8:59)

It isn't that we do not wish to be sensitive to people's needs, but we need to be honest in handling God's Word.

Throughout Warren's writings there exists a system of less-than-honest approaches in many areas, all with the intent of manipulating people into the faith. Better they be brought in through fear, which at least is a biblical way:

And on some have compassion, making a difference, and others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire; hating even the garment spotted by the flesh. (Jude 1:22-23)

### The Model Church?

While claiming to be the model church for all churches, Saddleback is more of an evangelistic center. And Warren is more of an evangelist than a genuine shepherd (pastor). I do not find fault with that except for a few things: 1) an evangelistic center does not minister to the believers. Substituting peer groups for that purpose does not fulfill the intent of the whole body fitly joined together; 2) the unscriptural "office" of pastor as defined by institutional religion is ineffective for ministering to believers, particularly when the pastor's focus is on unbelievers. This is the result of attempts to organize the churches into program-oriented institutions that cater only to the lowest common denominator with sermons designed not to offend—the "seeker friendly" Sunday morning service.

### CONCLUSION

The Saddleback model is not God's way of either winning the lost or of ministering to the Body of Christ. It is worldly-wise and lacking greatly in a true, unadulterated biblical foundation.

Nevertheless, a vast majority of Christians will continue to opt for just such a religious experience. Feel-good religion will always be the most popular kind. For those who want this kind of religion, there isn't much more we can say. God may use it to some degree, but it will not result in the true spiritual maturity it claims to achieve. For those who want the fullness of what God requires of them as well as the opportunity to minister the Word of God without adulterating the ministry with psychological mumbo-jumbo, it's time to come out and be separate. ❖

### END NOTES

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7. Ibid., p. 9.
8. Ibid., p. 325.

9. Rick Warren, *The Purpose-Driven Church: Growth Without Compromising Your Message & Mission* (Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), p. 297.

10. Op. Cit., P. 17.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid., p. 18.

13. Ibid., p. 19.

14. Ibid., p. 20.

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid., p. 25.

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19. Ibid., p. 27.

20. Ibid., p. 28.

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23. Ibid., p. 30.

24. Ibid., p. 31.

25. Ibid., p. 88.

26. Ibid., p. 89.

27. Ibid., p. 108.

28. Ibid., p. 88.

29. Ibid., p. 91.

30. Ibid., p. 161.

31. Ibid., p. 167.

32. Ibid., p. 188.

33. Ibid., p. 204.

30. Ibid., p. 233.

31. Ibid., p. 275.

32. Ibid., p. 245.

33. R.W. Coan, "Personality Types," *Encyclopedia of Psychology*, Vol. 3., p. 24.

34. It may be argued that the KJV uses lower case pronouns for God, but that was before the practice of using upper case was adopted. It would be good for KJV publishers to change that.

35. *The Purpose-Driven Life*, Op. Cit., p. 63.

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37. Ibid., p. 92.

38. Ibid., p. 94.

39. Rick Warren, *The Purpose-Driven Church: Growth Without Compromising Your Message & Mission* (Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), p. 25.

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42. Rick McClatchy and Bruce Prescott, "How the SBC has Changed," [www.mercer.edu/baptiststudies/pamphlets/prescott/sbcchange.htm](http://www.mercer.edu/baptiststudies/pamphlets/prescott/sbcchange.htm).

43. Jerry Falwell, *The National Affairs Briefing*, Dallas, Texas, August 21 and 22, 1980.

44. *The Purpose-Driven Church*, Op. Cit., p. 19.

45. Ibid.

46. Ibid., p. 33.

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64. Ibid., p. 108.

65. [www.saddleback.org/home/carehelp/celebrate\\_recovery.asp](http://www.saddleback.org/home/carehelp/celebrate_recovery.asp).

66. *The Purpose-Driven Church*, Op. Cit., p. 40.

67. Ibid., p. 170.

68. Ibid., p. 65.

69. Ibid., p. 232.

70. Ibid., p. 199.