

Think on These Things

(Philippians 4:8)

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The Purpose-Driven Life: An Evaluation Part I

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In our last paper I identified three relatively recent areas of concern in relationship to the Scriptures. First, there are the new hermeneutical approaches that either emphasize the subjective over the objective interpretation of Scripture, or allow for preunderstanding to be brought to the Word. The result is that the reader sits in judgment over the meaning of the text rather than allowing the Word to speak for itself. Next, I discussed some modern translations that have moved away from a literal philosophy to a dynamic-equivalent approach. I argued that the freer the translation the more interpretation is taking place by the translators, and this often takes place at the expense of the objective meaning of the passage.

These two concerns lead naturally to the third. If the reader is free to alter the meaning of the objective biblical text due to his own subjectivity or presuppositions; and if the translators are free to alter the objective biblical text with the notion that they are making it more readable or relevant or less offensive (this is especially true in paraphrases such as *The Message*); then why can't a local church or Christian leader do the same in their teaching? If the sense of a passage of Scripture is up for grabs; if your understanding is as good as mine; if a text has more than one meaning and all meanings are equally justified, then why study the Bible at all? Why not think up something you want to teach and then run to the Scriptures to try to find a passage that supports your views? Of course, this has been an all too common practice for years. But now there is a new twist. When a leader wants to develop a certain thesis and ground it in the Scriptures, but no objectively understood passage can support this particular notion, what is to be done? He might force a passage out of context, simply misinterpret it and hope no one notices. Or he might allegorize or spiritualize the passage, adding a foreign meaning. But all of this has been done before. A novel approach, one that might work even better, is to get creative and find a translation or paraphrase that will back your claim – even if that translation has seriously distorted the passage. With this final methodology there is the advantage of actually using the Scriptures as the authority and a fair amount of certainty that few will ever bother to check the passage for its accuracy and/or context. All of this brings to mind Peter's comments concerning the untaught and unstable distorting the Scriptures to their own destruction (2 Peter 3:16). The word "distort" in that verse basically means "to torture." It is the idea of twisting Scripture to make it mean something it was not intended to mean, with the end result being our own destruction.

This last accusation seems mean-spirited at best, but the evidence is rapidly coming in that such is the latest rage. I first discovered this new fad when I visited some market-driven evangelical churches. Here were churches that, to my knowledge, still preach the gospel and hold to most of the fundamentals of the faith. Their worship services were crowded and full of enthusiasm. Spiritual life appeared to flow as the congregations sang praise choruses. But something was missing – Bibles. In one church of over 400 I saw only a handful of people carrying Bibles. I wondered why until I sat through the service and found that Bibles were not needed. The Scriptures were never opened, never read. When the pastor preached at least he did open his Bible, but he asked no one to open theirs, nor did he expect anyone to

do so. He preached a message loosely based on Scripture and throughout his sermon his main points were projected on the overhead screens along with a few Scripture verses. While the superficiality of the message and the lack of Bibles disturbed me, at least, I thought, he did preach from the Bible and at least verses were projected on the screens. But still, a church with no open Bibles created the scent of spiritual death to me. Was I just being too picky? Many who come to church today are biblically illiterate. They can barely find Genesis, let alone Ezekiel. Maybe this method had merit.

With a little research and input from others I began to realize that what I had experienced was not an unusual event. Churches all across the land are following the same methodologies. Apparently the church-growth leaders have been recommending this approach and their disciples have jumped on board—in many cases, perhaps, without serious evaluation. But it is dangerous for Christians to close their Bibles. What are Bereans to do without their Bibles? What if the leadership of the church has an agenda they want to foster and they misuse the Scriptures to promote it? Who would examine the Word and “see whether these things are so” (Acts 17:11). It appeared to me to be a dangerous trend.

The Purpose-Driven Life

About that time I picked up Rick Warren’s runaway bestseller, *The Purpose-Driven Life*. Warren’s book promises to be “a guide to a 40-day spiritual journey that will enable you to discover the answers to life’s most important question: What on earth am I here for?” More than that, “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” (p.9). With this kind of promo and with Warren’s notoriety, we would expect his book to sell well, and it has. Not only is it the number one best selling Christian book at the time of this writing but thousands of churches are gearing up to take his 40-day spiritual journey.

First, we should say a word or two about Warren himself and his book in general. His first book, *The Purpose-Driven Church*, has greatly influenced churches throughout the world, due certainly to the fact that the church he pastors, Saddleback Church in southern California, is one of the largest churches in America, and a trendsetter among new paradigm churches. Saddleback reports that over 300,000 pastors from over 100 countries have been trained at their leadership conferences. Warren obviously has astounding influence over churches throughout the world.

There are a number of similarities between *The Purpose-Driven Church* and *The Purpose-Driven Life*. Both, for instance, offer some good sound advice, helpful biblical insight and practical suggestions—and both are riddled with errors throughout. The highly discerning reader can perhaps sift through the wheat and tares and make a good loaf of bread, but most readers, I fear, will swallow the poison along with the substance. This leads me to ask, “Who is Warren’s audience?” I was thoroughly bewildered as to whom the author was trying to connect. If it is a book for the unsaved then he fails, for the gospel is never at anytime clearly presented. The closest he came was when he wrote, “Real life begins by committing yourself completely to Jesus Christ” (p. 58). In Warren’s gospel no mention is made of sin, repentance or even the Cross. Real life (i.e., a life with purpose) seems to be the reward, and lack of real life (purpose) the problem. The thesis of *The Purpose-Driven Life* is stated, I believe, on page twenty-five, “We discover that meaning and purpose only when we make God the reference point of our lives.” **Warren’s message is this: find God and you will find yourself (purpose).** We will agree that meaning and purpose will be a reality to the Christian, but they are not the objects of the gospel itself. The gospel is that we as rebellious sinners have offended a holy God, are dead in our sins, enslaved to sin and the devil and under the wrath of God. But God, rich in mercy, sent His Son to die as our substitute to redeem us from our lost condition and give us eternal life. We receive this gift by faith as we turn to Christ, and from sin (Ephesians 2:1-10). That our life takes on new purpose at that point is absolutely true. However, we do not come to Christ because we sense a lack of purpose, but because God has opened our eyes to our need for forgiveness of sin and a relationship with Him. This is one of the fatal flaws in the market-driven church’s message in which the unbeliever is called to follow Christ in order to

receive any number of benefits—fulfillment, self-esteem, improved marriage, a thrilling lifestyle, or purpose, rather than freedom from sin and the gift of eternal salvation.

If Warren is writing for new believers, which seems the case due to the elementary tone and substance of the whole book, he again misses the mark, for he uses many expressions and biblical references that would be unfamiliar to the novice. On the other hand, if he is writing to the mature he has wasted paper, for any semi-well-taught believer will be completely bored with this book. So, while much praise will surely be lavished on *The Purpose-Driven Life*, it escapes me who will really profit.

Be that as it may, I want to give credit where credit is due. Warren writes some good sections on a number of subjects, including worship, community, the church, truth and spiritual gifts. If some of these topics could be isolated from the main body, they would make for helpful reading. But when interspersed with an array of erroneous ideas, distortions of Scripture and plain false teaching, they are of little value and may prove dangerous.

As I began reading this book, the problems were so numerous and obvious that I backed up and began marking these errors. I found 42 such biblical inaccuracies, plus 18 out-of-context passages of Scripture, supposedly used to prove his point, and another 9 distorted translations. (I will return to some of these in a moment). In general, there is much that is disturbing within the pages of *The Purpose-Driven Life*. Even though he denies it, Warren is obviously a disciple of pop-psychology, which is littered throughout. The wise reader is well aware that simply because someone denies they are teaching something does not mean they are not teaching it. The proof is not in the denial but in the substance. In this case Warren on the one hand repeatedly rejects psycho-babble, but on the other hand he immerses his reader in it. One example is "Most conflict is rooted in unmet needs" (p.154). You will find that idea in Rogers and Freud but try to find it in Scripture. He quoted favorably from a wide variety of dubious authors, from Aldous Huxley and Albert Schweitzer to George Bernard Shaw and St. John of the Cross (Catholic mystic). He apparently believes practicing Roman Catholics are true believers, several times mentioning monks and nuns as Christian examples, and of course the obligatory reference to Mother Teresa (twice). This unqualified acceptance and promotion of Catholics brings into question Warren's understanding of the gospel message itself. If he believes that faithful Roman Catholics, who believe in a works-righteousness, are born-again Christians, what does he believe the gospel is? Do we receive the gift of salvation by faith alone, or by faith plus certain works and sacraments? This is no minor issue, especially in a book that never spells out the plan of salvation.

Warren, however, is not totally off base, and I would not want to portray him as such. Without question he is as evangelical as many evangelicals. Nevertheless, when every third page (on average) of a book presents either an unbiblical, or at least a biblically unsupportable idea, there is not much sense bothering to read it. And that would be my suggestion—don't bother.

Torturing Scripture

What we want to do in the remainder of our examination of Warren's popular book is to point out some examples of his distortion of Scripture. This is not to say that everything he says is wrong. The irony is that often he will say something that is biblically correct, but rather than use proper scriptural support he chooses to twist the meaning of some other passage to prove his point. Our concern here is focused on his blatant twisting of the biblical text to suit his purposes. This is a dangerous trend that will lead to nothing good if not recognized, challenged and rejected by the Christian community.

Matthew 16:25

As stated above, it is not unusual for Warren to make good statements, such as his rejection of pop-psychology, then turn around and by his misuse of Scripture promote the very thing he just condemned.

The reader is then faced with two problems: what does Warren really believe about this subject and, more importantly, why has he chosen to either distort the Word of God directly or through his use of faulty translations? For example, in the midst of his denial of pop-psychology (p. 19) he quotes *The Message* translation of Matthew 16:25 – *Self-help is no help at all. Self-sacrifice is the way, my way, to finding yourself, your true self* (emphasis mine throughout). *The Message* has altered the meaning of Jesus' words into a means by which a person finds himself, a fad having roots back to the 1960s but not to the Bible. Compare the NASB rendering: "For whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake shall find it." Jesus is speaking of eternal life (v. 26 makes this clear), not the modern day concept of "finding yourself." There is a bit of bait-and-switch going on in many of these quotes. Warren is attempting to tap into the current felt-needs making the rounds—in this case finding ourselves and/or finding our purpose in life. He is then presenting the Christian life as a means of meeting that felt-need. It is true that the Lord will give you purpose in life, but that purpose will be to live for and follow Christ. It is not a promise that we will find ourselves (if you ever find yourself you are going to be disappointed anyway) but that we will find true life in Christ. What often happens is subtle: Warren turns these passages, and the Christian life, from being Christ-centered to being centered on the human self, the individual. The focus now becomes us rather than Christ.

Romans 12:3

The thesis of the book is found on page 25, where Warren says, "We discover that meaning and purpose only when we make God the reference point of our lives. *The Message* paraphrase of Romans 12:3 says, *The only accurate way to understand ourselves is by what God is and by what he does for us.*" *The Message* has subtly changed the meaning of the text. To see how, we turn to a good translation. The NASB reads, *For by the grace given to me I say to every man among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith.* The thrust of the verse is the problem of pride, in the context of spiritual gifts (see verses 4-8). Apparently, some in the church body were arrogant about their spiritual gifts, leading to anger, bitterness and vengeance (see verses 9-21). Paul told them not to think so highly of themselves but to have sound judgment in reference to their giftedness. The result would be the proper functioning of the body. The passage is not giving a formula for how to understand ourselves. *The Message* abuses the true meaning of the text and yet Warren quotes it to support his thesis.

In both of these examples Warren's use of Scripture is just close enough to be confusing, but neither of these passages are being used as they were meant to be. This is not a minor issue. Once we believe we have the right to change the meaning of God's Word to suit our agenda, there is no limit as to how far the misrepresentation of God's truth can go. This is exactly how virtually every cult and heresy is started. While I am not accusing Warren of this level of deception, it should greatly concern us to see him adopting the same attitude toward the Scriptures. And it should disturb us even more to discover that so few Christians care.

We will continue our evaluation of *The Purpose-Driven Life* in our next paper.

Southern View Chapel is an independent Bible church affiliated with the IFCA and dedicated to the careful, systematic, expository teaching of the Word of God. "Think on These Things Ministries" is the publishing ministry of Southern View Chapel. It focuses primarily on contemporary theological issues that face the church today.

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