

A Biblically based commentary on current issues that impact *you*

## ISSUE 80 - The Gospel: A Method or a Message? How the Purpose Driven Life Obscures the Gospel

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by Bob DeWaay

*"For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe."* (1Corinthians 1:21)

A few months ago a friend phoned to ask if I had ever heard of Rick Warren. "Yes" I replied. "Why are you asking"? He said, "I just got kicked out of a Bible Study for bringing my Bible to it." That is how the idea for this article came to me.

The Bible study my friend attended was really a *Purpose Driven Life* study group. The Purpose Driven Life book they were studying referenced Bible passages that sounded off base. He was told that if he was going to attend the study, he would have to leave his Bible at home, because the issues he brought up were disruptive to the group. He chose to quit instead.

My first reaction was that the study group was just poorly led. A few days later my friend gave me the book to read for myself. In the first three pages I saw why bringing a real Bible would disrupt a group studying Rick Warren. First, Warren cited many questionable Bible translations, often without verse reference. Apart from that, one had to locate the reference (information buried in the back of the book), find the reference in a real Bible, go back to the place where Warren used the passage to see if the quoted "translation" had any resemblance to the passage from an acceptable text, and **then** make a decision about whether the verse in question supported Warren's claim. Of course, that would disrupt a Bible study. Forty days of purpose would soon be forty **months!**

Rick Warren's eleven million copy bestseller has replaced Bible preaching in thousands of pulpits and has replaced the Bible in many thousands of Bible study groups. His website claims he is starting a new Reformation. His claim is that rather than reform what the church teaches like Luther did, Warren is going to reform what the church does. He is well on his way. Warren has turned the Gospel of Jesus Christ into a method. The method is to invite people on a forty day journey to discover the meaning of life.<sup>1</sup> Warren's students are asked to take an oath before a witness (which Jesus forbids) to turn forty days of their life over to Rick Warren and his method. And there is more.

In this article I will show that Warren's book teaches an approach to the gospel that is not Biblical. His teaching is in keeping with popular, American, evangelical pietism so it is no wonder most evangelicals cannot see what is wrong with it. It comes from a stream of theology that can be traced back to Charles Finney who popularized a methodological "how to" approach to the gospel that puts spiritual revival in the hands of man to work at will. In doing so neither the message nor the method of Jesus Christ and His apostles is followed. To help show the difference between Warren's method and the gospel message I will cite John MacArthur's book *Hard to Believe* which explains the unadulterated gospel better than any book I have recently read.<sup>2</sup> There is a chasm between the teachings of Warren and those of MacArthur. They cannot both be right. Let's begin.

### This is Not about YOU, or is it?

Rick Warren begins the first day of his journey by saying, "It's not about you" (Warren: 17). Yet the entire book "feels" like it **is** about you and reads like self-help literature. He dedicates the book to "you" on the first page after the copyright information and uses the pronoun "you" continually throughout the book. Consider the following from day eight:

**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. . . . 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? (Warren: 63). (Italics in original; bold emphasis mine)

His statement that this is not about “you” is disingenuous (insincere). His style, word usage, Man-centeredness, distorted Bible translations, and many overt statements show that the book **is** about you!

Here is one more example of how obtrusive the personal pronoun “you” is in Warren’s writing:

**Your** unspoken life metaphor influences **your** life more than **you** realize. It determines **your** expectations, **your** values, **your** relationships, **your** goals, and **your** priorities. For instance, if **you** think life is a party, **your** primary value in life will be *having fun*. If **you** see life as a race, **you** will value *speed* and will probably be in a hurry much of **your** time. If **you** view life as a marathon, **you** will value *endurance*. If **you** see life as a battle or a game, *winning* will be very important to **you** (Warren: 42). (italics in original; bold emphasis mine)

Here we have sixteen instances of “you” or “your” in one short paragraph. Notice also how Warren speaks what is no more than his own personal opinion as if it were God’s truth. He claims a “life metaphor” determines much of who we are. By what authority does he make such a claim? This is nothing but human wisdom. Warren started out this section saying, “The way you *see* your life *shapes* your life. How you define life determines your destiny” (Warren 41). Why should I believe these statements? Warren speaks from his own self as if he were God’s authoritative spokesperson. This is Christianized humanism. Our thoughts and metaphors have nothing to do with the gospel. We need to deny self, not set up the right thoughts and life metaphors to assure a wonderful destiny.

In researching this article, I had to read Warren for long periods of time. This was difficult for me. I found his material disturbing. To cleanse my mind from Warren’s continual assaults on my thinking I took breaks to read John MacArthur’s *Hard To Believe*. MacArthur got my mind and heart back on the gospel and away from me (where Warren keeps wanting to put it). Let me do the same for my readers. Listen to MacArthur’s version of what to do with “YOU”:

Jesus set the standard as total self-denial. In Luke 14:26, a great multitude was following Him and He turned and spoke to them: “If anyone comes to Me” – meaning those who wanted to be His true followers—“and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple.” Self-hate? What a powerful truth! . . . Following Jesus is not about you and me. Being a Christian is not about us; it’s not about our self-esteem. It’s about our being sick of our sin and our desperation for forgiveness (MacArthur: 10).

MacArthur points us to the clear teachings of Jesus, not some questionable idea that a “life metaphor” determines our destiny. We need to die to self, not discover self.

Warren would have us believe that something is furry, meow’s, has four legs, and likes to chase mice, but is not a cat. He tells us that his book is not about “you” and then spends over three hundred pages making it about you, over and over. This doesn’t just look like self-help, read like self-help, sound like self-help and feel like self-help, it **is** self-help and it **is** about you. That doesn’t help me. I need the gospel to solve my sin problem. I don’t need Warren aphorisms—and certainly not thousands of them.

## The User Friendly Gospel: Warren’s Wide Gate

Rick Warren’s gospel is never clearly described. Here is one of his statements about it: “God won’t ask about your religious background or doctrinal views. The only thing that will matter is, did you accept what Jesus did for you and did you learn to love and trust him?” (Warren: 34). But, doctrine does matter because our doctrine of Christ determines whether we believe in the Christ of the Bible or the Christ of Mormonism or some other religion.

John MacArthur’s hard-hitting book, on the other hand, makes the gospel clear, powerful, and unmistakable. John MacArthur puts forward the claims of Christ in His own words so that the reader is faced with the offense of the cross in unmistakable terms. Writes MacArthur, “We’ve seen that the frequent solution for making the message more popular and appealing is to distort and misrepresent the gospel by pumping up the easy parts and downplaying or ignoring the hard parts” (MacArthur: 201). Though MacArthur is not speaking of Warren, MacArthur could not have described Warren’s method more clearly. Warren’s book does contain many Biblical truths. Missing, however, are many necessary key truths. Subtracting key issues from the gospel changes its essence.

Warren discusses eternity on day four of his spiritual journey and uses it to introduce his version of the gospel. He tells his forty day pilgrims, “If you learn to love and trust God’s Son, Jesus, you will be invited to spend the rest of eternity with him. On the other hand, if you reject his love,

forgiveness, and salvation, you will spend eternity apart from God forever” (Warren: 37). Though he never explains the wrath of God against sin, the blood atonement, or the need for repentance (not in the context of the gospel that is), at least he acknowledges there is a hell. Warren is to be commended for including the possibility of being lost.

Let us consider how he presents the gospel: “If you learn to love and trust God’s Son . . .” It is true that we must love and trust Christ, but this is not how Christ or His apostles presented the gospel. They did not suggest that one has to “learn to love Jesus,” implying that were He just dressed up better He would be more lovable. Here is how Jesus said it, “*And after John had been taken into custody, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel!’*” (**Mark 1:14,15**). Warren is typical of “deeper life” teachers who teach “easy believism” to enter the Christian life and consider the claims of Christ to be options for those who want to be “world class Christians” (Warren: 297). Warren does not mention repentance until he gets to a chapter called “how we grow” (Warren: 182). Jesus (**Mark 1:14, 15**), Peter (**Acts 2:38**), and Paul (**Acts 17:30**) commanded people to repent as terms of entrance into the kingdom, not as a special teaching for elite Christians. Repentance is part of the Great Commission: “*He said to them, ‘Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and rise again from the dead the third day;’ and that repentance for forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem*” (**Luke 24:46, 47**).

Learning to love Jesus (whose person and work is never clearly explained by Warren) sounds so inviting. Repenting in order to flee the wrath of God against sin just doesn’t sell in today’s religious climate. Warren makes another gospel invitation on page 58: “Right now, God is inviting you to live for his glory by fulfilling the purposes he made you for.” Warren makes believing very easy: “all you need to do is *receive* and *believe*” (Warren: 58). He asks, “Will you accept God’s offer?” (Warren: 58). After urging his readers to believe God chose them and receive the Holy Spirit for power to “fulfill your life purpose” (Warren 58), he offers a little prayer that will save people. According to Warren, here is how you are saved: “I invite you to bow your head and quietly whisper the prayer that will change your eternity, ‘*Jesus, I believe in you and I receive you.*’” Then he makes this promise, “If you sincerely meant that prayer congratulations! Welcome to the family of God!” (Warren: 59). Say a little prayer and believe in a Jesus whose person and work have not been clearly explained to you and you will be saved, or so Warren says.

This is not the narrow gate that Jesus mentioned in Matthew 7. MacArthur warns about Warren’s sort of teaching, “According to lots of churches and preachers, the answer is to popularize the gospel: get rid of all this slaying-yourself and carrying-your-cross stuff, and get a decent band up there on stage” (MacArthur: 12). This is in a section about the narrow gate. MacArthur continues, “Listening to a seeker-sensitive evangelical preacher today, we’re likely to think it’s easy to be a Christian. Just say these little words, pray this little prayer, and poof! you’re in the club.” (MacArthur: 12). This is exactly what Warren suggested as the gospel, “Pray this little prayer.”

Do you suppose Stephen would have been martyred had he told his audience, “God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life, just say this little prayer and you will find out for yourself”? Here is what Stephen preached: “*You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did. Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become; you who received the law as ordained by angels, and yet did not keep it!*” (**Acts 7:51\_53**). After citing the history of Israel from the Old Testament, Stephen brought his listeners face to face with Messiah and the fact that they had refused to listen to Him. They needed circumcised hearts! (Moses promised a circumcised heart in **Deuteronomy 30:6**). They needed to be converted by God’s grace and embrace the Messiah they had betrayed. They killed Stephen instead. Stephen is honored in the Bible. He knew nothing of the Warren version of the gospel.

The problem is that the user-friendly gospel is giving people false assurance. MacArthur explains, “People are breezing through those wide, comfortable, inviting gates with all their baggage, their self-needs, their self-esteem, and their desire for fulfillment and self-satisfaction. And the most horrible thing about it is they think they’re going to heaven” (MacArthur: 13). Warren skips many things, including the blood atonement, the doctrine of justification, the wrath of God against sin, a clear presentation of the person and work of Christ, and the need for repentance as part of the gospel. He replaces all these things with a personal journey to find one’s purpose. No wonder millions are entering the broad gate that he offers. Warren claims that we find our true self, MacArthur says that our true self is so wicked and perverted that it must die. MacArthur writes, “But start preaching the *true* gospel, the hard words of Jesus that call for total and absolute self-denial—the recognition that we’re worth nothing, commendable for nothing, and that nothing in us is worth salvaging—and that’s a lot less popular” (MacArthur 14, 15). What we have is the narrow gate and the wide one, they lead to entirely different destinies.

## How Warren’s Bible Perversions Thwart Bereans

Earlier I mentioned that reading *The Purpose Driven Life* and checking it out with the Bible is a tedious task. Let me illustrate this using one of Warren’s Bible references. Here is Warren’s quote, “The Bible says, ‘Self-help is no help at all. Self-sacrifice is the way, my way, to finding yourself, your true self’” (Warren: 19). There is an endnote that takes us to the back of the book. Once there, looking for endnote 3, we have to figure out which of the forty days we are in. So with one finger in the endnote section, we go back to where we started to find out we were in day one. Now we go back to the end note section for day one and find out the reference is to **Matthew 16:25** Msg. Assuming that msg is not the food additive, we proceed to the section in the back of the book that tells us the meaning of the abbreviations, and we find out that it is from a Bible called *The Message*. Now, having determined what passage is under consideration, we get out a real Bible (not a paraphrase) and find out what **Matthew 16:25** says. Here it is: “*For whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake shall find it!*” (**Matthew 16:25**).

Now we need to compare **Matthew 16:25** with *The Message* perversion of it. In the context, Jesus was speaking of dying to self by taking up one's cross (**Matthew 16:24**). The cross was not a burden to bear, but an executioner's device. A person seen carrying his cross had literally been sentenced to death and was on the way to the place where he would be executed. So the person who "loses his life" is the one who has died to all hopes and dreams that the "self" ever had in this life. He is willing to suffer the loss of everything, even life itself if need be, for the sake of the gospel. His reward is eternal life. The person who considers the things of this life more important than the cross shall lose his life eternally. He has made the things of this life more important than his eternal soul. We are either willing to die to everything through the cross and gain eternal life, or we will cling to the things of this sinful world and gain hell.

Having established the meaning of **Matthew 16:25** in context, now we must return to the verse as cited by Warren: "Self-help is no help at all. Self-sacrifice is the way, my way, to finding yourself, your true self." **Matthew 16:25** is not discussing self-help, it is discussing life and death. **Matthew 16:25** is not discussing "finding your true self." The idea of a "true self" is a term of psychology and is not found in the Bible. **Matthew 16:25** is not talking about self-sacrifice, it is talking about dying to self. About the passage John MacArthur says this, "It's not about exalting me, it's about *slaying* me. It's the death of self. You win by losing, you live by dying. And that is the heart message of the gospel" (MacArthur: 5). Warren's version of the passage suggests that by self-sacrifice we find our "true selves." All false religions teach self-sacrifice, and finding one's true self is a New Age lie. The truth of the gospel is that we must die to self through the cross and put all of our hope in Christ by faith in His finished work.

Now, having established that *The Message* does not even have the same concepts as the Biblical passage it claims to be a paraphrase of, let's return to Warren's book and see how Warren uses it. He uses it to show that we need to find out the purposes God created us for. He says, "It is about becoming what *God* created you to be" (Warren: 19). Now we have been Bereans, searched the Scriptures, and found that Warren is abusing them. He has obscured the clear gospel message in Matthew 16:24, 25 and replaced it with a spiritual journey to find the "true self." So Warren ostensibly is telling us we do not need self-help and then sends us on a self-sacrificing journey to find our true self (which is self-help). This man is the master of confusing his readers.

Wow! What a lot of work it is to be a Berean when reading Warren. It took all of that effort to get through two paragraphs. The same process is necessary several times on every page. It is not possible to get through the forty day process in forty days unless you take forty days of vacation from work and spend an entire work day trying to figure out if the Bible actually supports his claims. The alternative, of course, is that you give up and just read the book as it is, trusting Warren's multitude of questionable Bible versions. Now I see why my friend got kicked out of a Warren "Bible" study. Checking out Warren with the Bible would disrupt and correct a Warren study—and they'd never finish in forty days!

After working on Warren for nearly three months, I finally gave up myself. The last ten chapters I read without looking up the references in the back or consulting a real Bible or checking to see if his claims were supported. I needed to get this article written. By that time I decided not to trust anything Warren said unless I knew before hand that it was the truth. My guess is that about fifty percent of his Bible citations are totally distorted (i.e. the translation is that bad) and a real Bible would not support the point Warren is making. Many of these versions take God-centered passages and make them man centered.

To show that the abuse of **Matthew 16:25** is not an isolated incidence, let us consider the passage Warren uses on the un-numbered cover page of his book where he dedicates it to "you." Here is the passage he cites: "It's in Christ that we find out who we are and what we are living for. Long before we first heard of Christ, . . . 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" (Ephesians 1:11 Msg. as cited by Warren). Here is what a real Bible says: "*also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will*" (**Ephesians 1:11**). First of all let us consider to whom Paul is speaking. It is clear from the context of Ephesians 1 the "we" means believers, not people in general. Warren is writing to people in general. He tells his readers that if they do not have a relationship with Jesus he will explain later how to have one (Warren: 20), which shows he is not writing just to Christians. Furthermore, Warren's "Bible" says, "we find out who we are." This suits his motif of a spiritual journey of self-discovery. But the real **Ephesians 1:11** says nothing about finding out who we are. It tells us that Christians have obtained an inheritance. Warren's version does not even mention that concept. It says, "he had his eye on us." The Bible says that Christians were "predestined according to His purpose." The pseudo-translation used by Warren does not even have the concept of predestination. The real Bible teaches God's sovereign purposes as the ground of the believer's hope, and assures us that God's comprehensive sovereignty means that nothing can thwart God's eternal purposes. Warren's "Bible" citation obscures this truth and implies universalism in the way he applies it.

It is sinful to claim to speak authoritatively for God when one is not. It is sinful to add to or take away from God's Word. One cannot introduce a statement "the Bible says" and then cite what the Bible does not say. Warren does this many times. The paraphrased Bibles he uses are often not even legitimate paraphrases. To paraphrase is to say the same thing in different words. When one says something totally different conceptually, then those words have no relationship to the meaning of the original author. To do this with the Bible is forbidden (**Deuteronomy 4:2; Revelation 22:18, 19**). To claim the weight of infallible, inerrant inspiration and use this to teach concepts totally unrelated to those of the Biblical authors is to take the Lord's name in vain. Warren does this often.

Here is one more example of this practice. Warren says, "God's motive for creating you was his love. The Bible says, '*Long before he laid down the earth's foundations, he had us in mind, and had settled on us as the focus of his love*'" (Warren: 24). The endnote reference tells us this is Ephesians 1:4a from *The Message*. Here is the NASB: "*just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world.*" Warren addresses all people (remember he has not yet told people how to become Christian). Since he applies this indiscriminately to all, his use of the paraphrase means that God's love is "focused" on all people. The real Ephesians 1:4a does not mention love, but God's act of choosing. The phrase, "He chose us in Him," obviously only applies only to the elect, not everyone in general. *The Message* makes the passage seem man-centered

("settled on us as the focus of his love"), whereas the Bible makes the passage God-centered ("He chose us in Him"). *The Message* does not even mention Christ but mentions "us" twice.

Trying to analyze Warren's theology is difficult because he never clearly states it. Apparently he is saying that God elected all people in general. Since it is clear Warren is not a universalist (Warren: 37), he seems to be saying that God elected everyone. Then our choices "un-elect" us if we do not make a decision for Christ (another of his distortions of the gospel). He writes, "Believe God has chosen you to have a relationship with Jesus, who died on the cross for you" (Warren: 58). Why should an unbeliever believe that God had chosen him before repenting and turning to God in faith? On what basis do we know we are God's elect? Surely we cannot know this on the basis that we are human beings. If Warren wants to deny predestination and election, he should just have the courage to deny these doctrines, not hide them under perverted Bible translations. This is really bad theology.

We have seen how hard it is for Warren's readers to search the Scriptures like the Bereans. He has made it very difficult to find out that he is abusing the Bible. He has cited some of the worst English translations of the Bible ever devised, even calling very loose paraphrases, "the Bible," when they are not.

We need some MacArthur at this point to cleanse our mind of Warren's confusion. We saw what Warren did with the doctrines of election and predestination. MacArthur summarizes Jesus' teachings in John 4:37-44:

Jesus was affirming the great truth of the doctrine of election: when the Father chooses, the Father teaches; when the Father teaches, they learn; when they learn, they're drawn; when they're drawn, they come, when they come, Jesus receives them; when He receives them, He keeps them; when He keeps them, He raises them to eternal life. And then the Father's purpose is accomplished. (MacArthur: 175)

Whether or not one agrees with MacArthur, one always knows what he teaches and why. Warren never does make it clear what he is teaching on this matter. His book confuses nearly every issue it addresses.

## American Pietism

On the surface, Warren promotes a very rigorous version of Christianity. He calls for total surrender as the way to the "deeper" life (Warren: 82, 83). He distinguishes between "worldly" and "world-class" Christians (Warren: 297). He tells his readers to do many things to make themselves better Christians. Most of it comes down to making choices and working harder at following Warren's teachings. In his teaching both salvation and sanctification are synergistic (i.e. man and God working together). Thus our part boils down to methods for being more holy. Warren says, "Spiritual growth is a collaborative effort between you and the Holy Spirit" (Warren: 180). He says, "Decide to be a disciple" (Warren: 180). He says concerning salvation, "God will give you what you need if you just make a choice to live for him" (Warren: 58). Yet again Warren says, "Christlikeness is the result of making choices and depending on his Spirit to help you fulfill those choices" (Warren: 180).

Many Christians will see nothing wrong with this teaching because they have been taught similar material most of their lives; but it is **not** what the Bible teaches. According to the Bible, one begins and continues in the Christian faith by grace through faith—and that grace is solely of God. Synergism was a key issue at the Reformation, with the Roman Catholic Church promoting man and God working together (synergism) and the Reformers teaching God working alone (monergism). Salvation is a work of God, not a cooperative effort between God and man. Becoming Christlike is not a matter of making the right choices, but a matter of trusting God through the gracious means He has provided—but right choices result. God is sovereign both in salvation and sanctification: "*For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the first-born among many brethren; and whom He predestined, these He also called; and whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified*" (Romans 8:29, 30). Paul asks, "*Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?*" (**Galatians 3:3**).

Pietism as expressed by Warren and many others looks for "secrets" to a deeper life through rigorous religious ritual or practices. He offers an easy way into the Christian life (make a choice and pray this little prayer) and then makes the teachings of Jesus about dying to self and carrying one's cross a higher level of Christian living for the truly pious. Jesus made these things part of the terms of salvation (see the story of the rich young ruler). The practice of offering easy believism for salvation and then presenting the claims of Christ's Lordship later as advancement in the Christian life, MacArthur calls "bait and switch" (MacArthur: 17). Warren commands his readers to do things God never asks of them. He makes things God commands (like repenting and believing the gospel) a choice, and things that are choices (like writing a journal Warren: 222, 308, 309) commands. Thus he perverts the gospel and the Christian life. Why should any of us submit to his man-made pietism? Rick Warren is not God's lawgiver.

## Mysticism

Mysticism usually goes hand and hand with pietism wherever it exists. When people promote "secrets for the deeper life," they generally claim to have received them by some divine revelation. These secrets often involve prayer techniques that help someone hear from God. True to form, Warren offers these in *Practicing the Presence of God* (Warren: 88) where he states, "practicing the presence of God is a skill" (Warren:

89). This mystical approach is borrowed from some versions of Roman Catholicism.

Warren also promotes “breath prayers” which are endless repetitions of short phrases (Warren: 89). Jesus forbids this type of prayer: “*And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition, as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words*” (**Matthew 6:7**). It is a pagan practice that has the effect of shutting down the mind. Warren suggests that God will share His secrets with us if we follow Warren’s techniques (Warren: 91). He promises that the meditative techniques he promotes will “let God speak to you” (Warren: 91). He says, “In the next chapter we will see four more secrets of cultivating a friendship with God” (Warren: 91).

There are no such secrets. There are the things revealed which are clearly taught in the Scriptures, and the secret things that belong to God alone (**Deuteronomy 29:29**). Secret, spiritual knowledge and techniques for gaining such knowledge are called “divination” in the Bible and are forbidden. The way to be a friend of God is through repenting and believing the gospel; it is not by practicing mystical religious techniques. MacArthur says, “Thus in the inspired word of the Bible, and only there, we have the mind of God and the mind of Christ” (MacArthur: 212).

## Do Not have a Bible Study, Have a Warren Study

Rick Warren makes an amazing claim. He writes, “The *last* thing many believers need today is to go to another Bible study. They already know far more than they are putting into practice” (Warren: 231). This shows that his deeper life pietism is an alternative to the means of grace provided in Scripture. The Word of God is a gracious means by which God changes us. Warren reduces the Bible to an instruction manual, a how to live a better life guideline. In that sort of thinking we should stop progress until we have mastered everything learned so far. But that is **not** what the Bible says. The Word of God changes us progressively. As we study we have our minds renewed and our faith strengthened. If we must put into practice what we learn before we study more we would never study the Bible again after reading this verse: “*Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect*” (**Matthew 5:48**). According to Warren’s logic, if we know that verse, we know more than we are putting into practice and we should not go to another Bible study.

Later in his book we learn why Warren warns against Bible study for those who are not perfect: he has an alternative! “I *strongly* urge you to gather a small group of friends and form a Purpose-Driven Life Reading Group to review these chapters on a weekly basis” (Warren: 307). We are to have a Warren study to replace the Bible study. The amazing thing is that thousands and thousands of groups around the world have taken Warren’s advice and began studying his book, leaving their Bibles at home. Pastors are preaching from Warren’s materials rather than God’s Word. Warren also says, “After you have gone through this book together as a group, you might consider studying other purpose-driven life studies that are available for classes and groups” (Warren: 307). The message of the gospel has been replaced with the method of Rick Warren. The Bible has been supplanted by the wisdom of man.

In contrast to this, MacArthur, explaining Paul’s words in 2Corinthians 4, says, “We will not walk in *panourgia*, in trickery, adulterating the Word of God, tampering with the gospel to make it less offensive, in order for men to commend us. Instead, we will be faithful to the gospel, manifesting the truth in order to commend ourselves to every man’s conscience, with God watching” (MacArthur: 49). When we add unbiblical human methods and subtract essential aspects of the gospel, we adulterate it. That is exactly what Rick Warren has done.

## Syrupy Sentimentality

Warren’s terminology to describe God provides a picture of God as a kindly grandfather who gushes with warm, fuzzy feelings. For example, he has a chapter that tells us what makes God smile. He uses Noah as an example. He writes, “But there was one man who made God smile. The Bible says, ‘Noah was a pleasure to the Lord’” (Warren: 69). This is a citation of **Genesis 6:8** from the Living Bible. Again the paraphrase turns a verse that is God-centered into one that is man-centered. The NASB says, “*But Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord.*” The Bible tells what Noah received from God. The poor translation Warren uses makes Noah the agent and God the recipient. The NKJV is more pointed: “*But Noah found grace in the eyes of the LORD*” (**Genesis 6:8; NKJV**). In the Biblical account God gives grace to Noah, in Warren’s account Noah gives pleasure to God. Here is how Warren interprets **Genesis 6:8**: “God said, ‘This guy brings me pleasure. He makes me smile. I’ll start over with his family’” (Warren 69). He twists **Genesis 6:8** to promote his man-centered theology and obscure the fact that it was God’s grace that made Noah who he was.

Warren continually tells us what God feels when we do certain things. He says, “Like a proud parent, God especially enjoys watching you use the talents and abilities he has given you” (Warren: 74). He also says, “You only bring him enjoyment by being you” (Warren 75). Somehow Warren knows a cause and effect relationship between various things we do and God’s emotions. He says, “God even enjoys watching you sleep!” (Warren 75). He has discovered six **secrets** to being “a best friend of God” (Warren: 87).

Warren’s explanation of God leaves out many important truths and emphasizes those qualities that make God feel close and safe. This does not result in a full, Biblical understanding of God. You will never hear about God’s wrath against sin from Warren. You will never hear the warnings in the Bible about God’s coming judgment. You will not learn about God’s holiness from Warren. You will not hear passages like this: “*See to it that you do not refuse Him who is speaking. For if those did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less shall we escape who turn away from Him who warns from heaven*” (**Hebrews 12:25**).

The Bible teaches that God does not change. All of God's attributes are always His in their full perfection at all times. God continually is merciful and just. His wrath against sin coexists with His mercy toward those who repent and believe the Gospel. Warren's sentimentality makes God seem dependant on man for His happiness. The author of Hebrews continues: "*Therefore, since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe; for our God is a consuming fire*" (**Hebrews 12:28, 29**). Making God appear to be like a doting parent gaining happiness from watching his or her kid play softball does not do justice to the Biblical portrayal of the nature of God.

Theologically this constitutes over emphasizing God's immanence at the expense of His transcendence. This tendency is the hallmark of theological liberalism. The Bible teaches that both are true of God. For example this passage teaches both: "*For thus says the high and exalted One Who lives forever, whose name is Holy, 'I dwell on a high and holy place, And also with the contrite and lowly of spirit In order to revive the spirit of the lowly And to revive the heart of the contrite'*" (**Isaiah 57:15**). By never referencing passages about God being holy and separate from sinners, we gain a skewed understanding of God's nature.

## Conclusion

In 1982 Robert Schuller announced his plans for a new reformation based on self\_esteem.<sup>3</sup> His stated purpose was to make theology less God-centered and more man-centered. Now that Rick Warren has sold eleven million copies of the *Purpose Driven Life*, he too wants a new reformation. He is promoting a PEACE plan to solve the world's five biggest problems.<sup>4</sup> Apparently, the church needs a new reformation every twenty years. What happened to Schuller's reformation?

Thinking about this and carefully studying Warren's book, I have come to the conclusion that Rick Warren is completely in step with Schuller's reformation, and is carrying it forward in a way that is more appealing to evangelicals (whether or not he is consciously following Schuller). Warren's man-centered theology comes with more evangelical ideas than does Schuller's. Warren includes many more Biblical truths than Schuller ever did. In my opinion this makes Warren more deceptive than Schuller. Schuller ignored the Bible and depended on psychological concepts. Warren uses perverted Bible translations that change God-centered passages to man-centered passages. By carefully selecting the right mistranslation for each of his teaching points he has made the man-centered theology touted by Schuller **seem** Biblical.

Now Warren wants to reform the church to focus on social action rather than gospel preaching. Wow! Look how far we have come. One of these times this man-centered reformation will succeed. When it does the modern evangelical church will be the latest incarnation of liberalism.<sup>5</sup>

Each of us must choose between a man-centered, man-made method loosely derived from parts of the Bible and the clear message of the gospel. Rick Warren promotes the former, a broad path with millions of fellow travelers; John MacArthur promotes the latter, a narrow path that few follow.

The gospel is based on a crucified Jewish Messiah, a concept offensive to all sinners. However, to those who embrace the scandal of the cross and by faith escape the just wrath of God, that gospel is the power of God for salvation. Dear reader, you have a choice between a spiritual journey to discover your purpose and the message of the gospel that declares God's purposes. The one will make you think you are on the path to heaven when you may not be, the other will put you on the path to heaven by God's sovereign power. I urge you to embrace the gospel on God's terms.

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### End Notes

1. Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life*, (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 2002); Warren says that his book is, "[A] guide to a *40-day spiritual journey* that will enable you to discover the answer to life's most important question: What on earth am I here for?"; 9.
2. John MacArthur, *Hard to Believe – The High Cost and Infinite Value of Following Jesus*; (Thomas Nelson: Nashville, 2003) From here on in this article I will reference Warren and MacArthur according to this protocol: (MacArthur: 23). All references are to *The Purpose Driven Life* and *Hard to Believe* unless noted otherwise. The one issue I am aware of that I disagree with MacArthur about is his belief that the gifts of the Spirit have ceased.
3. Robert Schuller, *Self-Esteem: The New Reformation*, (Waco, Word Books, 1982).
4. <http://www.saddleback.com/home/todaystory.asp?id=6213> (on his website as of 2\_2\_04).
5. See <http://www.twincityfellowship.com/cic/articles/issue56.htm> which traces Robert Schuller to early 20<sup>th</sup> century liberalism. The seeker sensitive version of the church growth movement finds its inspiration from Schuller.

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## Critical Issues Commentary

Twin City Fellowship

P.O. Box 8068

Minneapolis, MN 55408

612-874-7484

[pastorbob@twincityfellowship.com](mailto:pastorbob@twincityfellowship.com)

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