

***The Purpose-Driven Church***  
A Review by Nathan Busenitz

If numbers were the only standard of success, *The Purpose-Driven Church* by Rick Warren would stand as one of the greatest books of our time. Having sold over one million copies in 20 different languages, it was selected as one of the “100 Christian Books that Changed the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.” Its supporters include men like W. A. Criswell, Bill Bright, Jerry Falwell, Robert Schuller, Adrian Rogers, and Jack Hayford. And the church that serves as its paradigm, Saddleback Church of Southern California, has grown from the house where it started (in 1980) to a weekly attendance of 16,000.

Yet, numbers are not the only measure of success—in fact, they’re not the standard at all. Rather, God teaches that His standard is faithfulness to His Word. After all, 1 Timothy 3:15 says that the purpose of the church is to be “the pillar and support of the truth.” And 2 Timothy 2:15 says that the purpose of the pastor is to accurately handle “the word of truth.” It is “the knowledge of the truth” that leads to godliness (Titus 1:1), and it is “obedience to the truth” that purifies the soul (1 Pet. 1:22). Thus, “as fellow workers of the truth” (1 John 3:18), pastors should seek to minister “for the sake of the truth” (2 John 1:2), in order that the people in their congregations might be those “who walk in truth” (2 John 1:4). The Biblical standard of success is never numbers, but rather the accurate proclamation of God’s truth (2 Tim. 2:15; James 3:1).

With this in mind, Warren’s seeker-sensitive model reveals several weaknesses.

**Entertainment v. Exposition**

A primary weakness in Warren’s approach is that he emphasizes the pastor’s ability to entertain over the pastor’s responsibility to speak the truth. On p. 231, Warren argues:

I’ve heard pastors proudly say, ‘We’re not here to entertain.’ Obviously they’re doing a good job at it. A Gallup poll a few years ago stated that, according to the unchurched, the church is the most boring place to be. . . . To the unchurched, dull preaching is unforgivable. Truth poorly delivered is ignored. On the other hand, the unchurched will listen to absolute foolishness if it is interesting.

While homiletics is certainly an important part of preaching, it is not the most important part. For Warren, the presentation seems to be more important than the truth being presented. The Apostle Paul’s priorities, however, were just the opposite—how he preached was not nearly as important as what he preached:

For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not in cleverness of speech, so that the cross of Christ would not be made void. (1 Cor. 1:17)

And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling, and my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God. (2 Cor. 2:1-5)

In light of his desire for relevance, Warren's preaching is naturally determined more by His audience than by the Scripture. On p. 227 he says:

One reason sermon study is so difficult for many pastors is because they ask the wrong question. Instead of asking, "What shall I preach on this Sunday?" they should be asking, "To whom will I be preaching?" Simply thinking through the needs of the audience will help determine God's will for the message. . . . People's immediate needs are a key to where God would have you begin speaking on that particular occasion.

Again, when compared to Paul, Warren's method comes up short. Instead of beginning with his audience, simply telling them what they wanted to hear, Paul started with the truth he knew his audience needed (even if they did not want to hear it). He says:

For am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God? Or am I striving to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bond-servant of Christ. For I would have you know, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ (Gal. 1:10-12)

In contrast, the seeker-sensitive model appears to put a higher priority on pleasing the audience than on honoring the Lord. It is no wonder, then, that Warren can say: "Being seeker sensitive in our worship is a biblical command" (p. 243) and "Keep your pastoral prayers short in your seeker services. . . . The unchurched can't handle long prayers; their minds wander or they fall asleep." Again, the question remains, should unbelievers determine what we do in the church, or should Scripture determine what we do? Warren's answer seems to be unbelievers (see p. 189).

### **Sensitivity v. Sovereignty**

Because of its seeker-sensitive approach, Warren's model encourages easy-believism whereas Scripture emphasizes sin, repentance, and self-denial. On pp. 303-305, Warren works through practical steps for persuading unbelievers to make a commitment for Christ. In fact, on p. 219, he states, "It is my deep conviction that anybody can be won to Christ if you discover the key to his or her heart . . . . The most likely place to start is with the person's felt needs." At least two problems immediately arise with Warren's model.

First, Warren dilutes the gospel in order to make it easier to believe. Stephen Lewis, in reviewing *The Purpose Driven Church* says this:

Not once does *The Purpose Driven Church* give a clear gospel message. In asking what people want (rather than what the Bible says they need) has Warren created followers or multitudes based upon their desires or perceived needs? Ironically, in John chapter 6, Jesus rebuked the very people He had just fed, because they only followed Him in search of more bread to satisfy their immediate hunger. Jesus met people's needs as a way of revealing and/or authenticating Himself before men. Any model purposing to create followers based upon fulfilling perceived needs risks making this into an end in itself. Again, where does *The Purpose-Driven Church* give people what they really need, the gospel of grace?" (CTSJ 6/2 April 2000, 56)

Second, Warren denies the sovereignty of God in salvation. By assuming that he can lead anyone to Christ through felt-needs, Warren directly contradicts the Biblical doctrine of election. After all, Scripture makes it clear that only those whom God calls will repent (Matt. 11:27; John 6:65; Rom. 9:18-24; Acts 13:48; Eph. 1:4-11; 1 Peter 1:1-2). Warren's seeker-sensitive approach denies the power of the Holy Spirit to use God's truth, no matter how it is presented, to penetrate the heart and bring spiritual life.

### **Other Theological Considerations**

In his seminar "Evaluating the Church Growth Movement," Rick Holland identifies several other theological problems with Warren's seeker-sensitive model.

1. Warren assumes that the primary purpose of Sunday morning church services is to reach out to unbelievers (see p. 243). In the New Testament, however, the reason the church gathers is for worship and equipping (Eph. 4:11-16; Acts 2:37-47). Evangelism is to primarily take place in the believer's life context ("as you go"—Matt. 28:18-20) rather than being the main focus of the Sunday worship service.
2. Warren assumes that unbelievers are "seeking," yet Scripture says, "There is none who seeks for God" (Rom. 3:11; Ps. 14:1-3).
3. Warren assumes that the gospel can be made inoffensive to unbelievers if presented correctly. Yet, Scripture teaches that the gospel is, by its very nature, offensive to those who hate God (1 Cor. 1:18, 21, 23, 25; 2:14; 1 Pet. 2:7-8).
4. Warren assumes that the style of music a church uses is one of its most important keys to reaching the culture (see pp. 280-281). Interestingly, the New Testament is silent regarding this "critical" element of church growth.
5. Warren assumes that large numbers indicate true success. He even says, "Never criticize any method that God is blessing" (p. 156) and interprets the "blessing" as that which draws a crowd. But what about the prophet Jeremiah's ministry? He faithfully proclaimed the truth his entire life and yet saw no fruit. According to Warren's model, Jeremiah was a failure.

### **Final Assessment**

While Warren's book does offer some practical tips for making a church larger, it fails to expound the foundational theological truths that make a church more biblical. Because it overemphasizes the felt needs of unbelievers and deemphasizes the priority of clear Biblical teaching, *The Purpose-Driven Church* seems to be driven by the wrong purpose—namely, a man-centered desire for acceptance and influence rather than a God-centered affinity for truth.

In this vein, the words of Al Mohler are very appropriate:

One of the fundamental issues of misunderstanding that leads to corrupt churchmanship in our generation is the failure to distinguish between a crowd and a church. The failure to distinguish between a crowd and a church is . . . to misunderstand everything about preaching, everything about ministry, everything about our task. If we think our business is to build a crowd, frankly any of us can do it. There's a way to bring and draw and attract a crowd. . . . Let us never mistake a crowd for a church [or] think our business is to draw a crowd. (Shepherds' Conference audio recording, March, 6, 2003)