

The Purpose Driven Church:

A Biblical Critique

Winter 2004

We present these notes as an aid toward understanding some of the principles of the Church Growth Movement, and Rick Warren's "purpose driven" materials in particular. Our goal is not to uncharitably or unfairly condemn their ministry, but it is necessary for us to identify where we depart from what we feel are unbiblical principles. Many people have undoubtedly come to faith through the efforts of this movement and we rejoice that sinners have been added to God's family. However, we are highly skeptical that the Kingdom of God is being built according to his Word or in a lasting manner, and urge believers to exercise discernment and wisdom in ascribing God's blessing to numerical growth alone.

Introduction

- The Church Growth Movement.
 - ◆ Characterized by a generic "evangelical" approach to the Gospel.
 - ◆ Typically theologically shallow.
 - ◆ Rick Warren has left his own doctrinal position largely undefined.
 - ◆ Lynn, MA is the latest battleground.
- On the surface, the changes and compromises may appear subtle.

Doctrine

- Popularizing and contemporizing the "Church" always sacrifices the integrity of the full Gospel message and biblical principles of true discipleship.

Consider the Parable of the Conscientious Builder – Luke 6:46-49

- Scope: The one who knows the truth of the Word must build upon it.
- "Comes to Me" (v. 47):
 - ◆ What is a true disciple?
- "My Words": All or some Words?
 - ◆ Particular verses or actions instead?
- "Foundation": Christ alone.
 - ◆ But which Christ is being preached?
- Results: Not numbers or miracles, but faithfulness.

Background

- Saddleback Church founded as a new plant in southern CA nearly 25 years ago.
- 19,000 at services each weekend; 15,000 members, some of whom attend midweek.
- Seeker services on Sat. and the Lord's Day – because that's when people said they would be willing to come.
- Claims to have "trained" 250,000 other Christian leaders.
- *The Purpose Driven Church* has sold over 4 million; *The Purpose Driven Life* has sold nearly 12 million.

Some Positive Achievements

- Some insightful classifications of church attendees, and a call to reevaluate the mission or purpose of each church.
- They present a clear purpose and a focused vision; as well as a thorough plan to accomplish their goals.
- The organization of the ministries and dedication of the staff creates confidence in their members.
- High standards for membership.
- A commitment to “saving” souls.

Claims

- The church claims to have built its system on the Great Commandment and the Great Commission.
- Rich warren claims that it is all about God.
- They claim to achieve growth without compromising the Gospel:
 - ◆ “We may be innovative with the style of ministry, but must never alter the substance of it.” (p. 98)
- But let’s look at their model and see if they uphold these claims.

The Purpose of the Saddleback Church

- The mission of Saddleback is largely to reach “unchurched” suburbanites.
 - ◆ “This church exists to benefit the residents of Saddleback Valley by providing for their spiritual, physical, emotional, intellectual, and social needs” (p. 220).
 - ◆ It has determined to meet “felt needs”.
 - ◆ They surveyed the community to find out what kind of church they would attend and what their turn-offs were.

Purpose Driven Purposes

- Starting a new church is easier than trying to change an old one (p. 180).
- A Purpose Driven church is to divide all its efforts into 5 categories:
 - ◆ Outreach: To Evangelize
 - ◆ Worship: To Exalt
 - ◆ Fellowship: To Encourage
 - ◆ Discipleship: To Edify
 - ◆ Service: To Equip

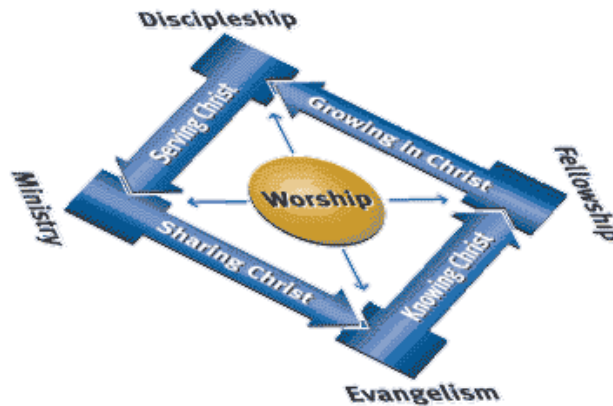
Purpose Driven Designations

- A Purpose Driven Church categorizes those who attend into:
 - ◆ Community: Unchurched
 - ◆ Crowd: Regular Attendees
 - ◆ Congregation: Members
 - ◆ Committed: Maturing Members
 - ◆ Core: Lay Ministers
- Each group is then targeted with one of the five purposes.



Purpose Driven Programs

- The Community needs to be attracted to what the church offers.
- The Crowd needs to have their needs met, be convinced the Gospel is for them, then come to salvation.
- The Congregation worships and fellowships (small groups).
- The Committed and Core are involved in midweek worship and deeper instruction.
- The Purpose Driven process:



What's the Real Purpose?

- The goal of the purpose driven movement is to meet the needs of and to serve people.
 - ◆ This results in programs.
- The goal of the Gospel is to reveal our sin against God and bring us back into right relationship with him.
 - ◆ This results in true worship.
- The Church is to challenge the culture rather than embrace it.

The Crowd

- Purpose Driven churches attract "a crowd" from the community to share the "Good News" with them.
- Warren claims he uses the same methods Jesus used with his crowds.
 - ◆ Reel them in like a fisherman (p.216).
 - ◆ Don't focus on their sin – crowds won't flock to hear "bad news" (p. 225).
 - ◆ The Crowd is not interested in truth – just results. So don't hit them with Bible characters or doctrines.
- But didn't Jesus confront people with their sin and demand they change right away? Didn't he speak "unpopular" truth that even drove some away (John 6)? He further explained the purposes behind his miracles rather than simply meeting "felt needs".

Use of Music

- Warren claims that choosing your style of music “may be **the** most influential factor in determining who your church reaches for Christ and whether or not your church grows” (p. 280).
- “Music can bypass intellectual barriers and take the message straight to the heart. It is a potent tool for evangelism” (p. 279).
 - ◆ It is true that music is a powerful tool – but a tool for what? Do we really want people to bypass the offensive truth of the Gospel and rather be attracted by the style in which it is presented? (Warren further misinterprets “a new song” from the Psalms as being the latest musical style rather than a fresh attitude being expressed to the Lord.)
- Saddleback surveyed its community and discovered the majority listened to MOR Adult Contemporary or Pop music on the radio, and adopted that style (p. 285).
 - ◆ Warren admits they may have turned off potential members, but they attracted far more once they implemented the switch from hymns to contemporary praise/pop.
 - ◆ Pop music is considered by critics to pander to the lowest common-denominator. Is this giving our best back to God?
 - ◆ Should it be left up to seekers to program the musical choices of a church, or the leaders God has appointed to make wise choices honoring to Him?
- For their opening song, Saddleback uses “a bright, upbeat number that makes you want to tap your foot, clap, or at least smile.” “...we wake up the body of Christ by waking up our own bodies ...after our ‘Inspire Movement’ opening song the atmosphere always changes to being more cheerful and alert” (p. 256).
 - ◆ Of course this approach works. But people are responding to rhythm and an emotional lift rather than truth. This approach wakes up their natural side rather than a spiritual one. They glorify themselves instead of God. (Why not open instead with an exercise period with calisthenics or Tai Chi?)

Troubling Quotes

- Warren often contradicts himself, but never so often as when he needs to attack the traditional church.
 - ◆ “Are you being faithful to God’s Word if you insist on communicating in an outdated style? ..I contend that when a church continues to use methods that no longer work, it is being unfaithful to Christ!” (p. 65).
 - ◆ “I believe it is a sin to bore people with the bible” (p. 231).
 - ◆ “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” (p. 219).
 - ◆ “We should never criticize any method that God is blessing” (p. 156). (The question is: does growth automatically mean God is blessing? Can we say God blesses the Crystal Cathedral or Islam – simply because they are growing?)

Misuse of Scripture

- Warren often uses very weak exegesis of biblical passages to build his case.
- A limited amount of verses defines the approach – seen through a very narrow hermeneutic pertaining to a salvation message alone.
- Nearly exclusive use of non-literal, modern translations:
 - ◆ Eph. 4:29: (speak) only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.” Compare with the NASB: “(speak) only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment so that it will give grace to those who hear.”

Serious Problems

- It takes a pragmatic approach.
 - ◆ It asks what man wants rather than what God wants.
 - ◆ It caters to felt needs (p. 219) rather than real needs.
- It is essentially Arminian:
 - ◆ Definition: Man ultimately accepts or rejects God’s purposes and provision.
- It lacks historical perspective or appreciation.
- Incomplete Gospel presentation:
 - ◆ Contains the most generic evangelicalism, beginning with the 4 spiritual laws and ending with personal fulfillment.
 - ◆ De-emphasizes the path of sacrifice and suffering that characterizes true discipleship.
 - ◆ Doesn’t trust in the power of the Word alone to penetrate and convict (Heb. 4:12).
- It is numbers driven; assumes God has blessed because of growth.
- Warren believes there are no regulated standards for worship.
- The Lord’s Day is not set aside for worship or even observed.
- It will not commit a legacy of faithfulness and teaching to future generations (2 Tim 2:2).
- It removes the personal teaching ministry of the pastor from the flock, focusing more upon video-taped messages and lay leaders.
- When you reach out to only a particular demographic, you create a cult or a club – not a church.
 - ◆ Saddleback reaches an affluent, suburban community with mostly educated and professional people.
 - ◆ A true church needs the contribution of all ages, social types, and economic situations, to minister to and be ministered to.
- It has nothing to say to other cultures.
 - ◆ In fact, this approach will be offensive to world Christians.

Conclusions

- There are no shortcuts to faith or a back door to salvation.
- There is a discipline to worship; and God sets the standards for true worship – not man.
- The most troubling aspect of this approach pertains to the methods used to reach unbelievers; some of the means used to mature believers are more “implementable”.
- Purpose Driven ministries are more properly para-church, and would better serve as an evangelistic arm of the Church.
- It is the Lord’s job to grow His Church.