

# The Purpose Driven Life

## Reformed reflections on Rick Warren's book

reviewed by Johan D. Tangelder

To say *Purpose-Driven Life* is a popular book is to be a master of understatement. Over 16 million copies have been sold since it was first published in October of 2002. *Publishers Weekly* rated it as the top-selling book in 2003 – not just the top-selling Christian book, or the top-selling non-fiction book, but rather the top-selling book period! It sold 11.3 million copies that year, while its nearest rival, the (blasphemous) novel *The Da Vinci Code* sold only half that at 5.7 million copies. *RP* asked Rev. Tangelder to examine Rick Warren's book when it became clear that it was growing in popularity in Reformed circles as well. - *JD*

Rick Warren's book, *The Purpose Driven Life*, was on the *New York Times* bestseller list for weeks. It is also a top seller in Canada, not only in Christian bookstores but also in discount chains such as Costco and Wal-Mart. The book is divided into 40 short chapters and can be read as a daily devotional or studied by small groups. Thousands of churches have either used it or are currently using it, and other *Purpose Driven* materials during special campaigns called *40 Days of Purpose*. The book has an ambitious agenda. Warren calls it "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?" (p.9).

He says that his book will help readers "understand God's incredible plan for their lives." The plan? Real meaning and significance come from understanding and fulfilling God's purposes for us on earth. Warren says that God's purposes for each one of us are:

1. We were planned for God's pleasure.
2. We were formed for God's family.
3. We were created to become like Christ.
4. We were shaped for serving God.
5. We were made for a mission.

Warren says that wonderful things are going to happen in your life as you begin to live it on purpose. He claims to be all "excited because I know all the great things that are going to happen to you" (p.12).

Rick Warren attempts to be as plain, uncomplicated, and simple as possible in his book. It contains some good advice, helpful Biblical insights, and practical suggestions. He reminds believers that time on earth is short and our fruitfulness counts for eternity. He emphasizes the importance of humility, loving relationships, and service in the life of the believer. He also addresses the reality of temptation and the means to win spiritual victory over temptation.

Who is Rick Warren? He is the founding pastor of Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, California, one of America largest megachurches. He is a fourth-generation Baptist with a congregationalist view of the church. He rejects infant baptism and consequently the golden thread of the covenant which runs through Scripture. For whom did he write? He sends mixed messages. If it is for Christians then they swallow a lot of Scripture twisting along with the message. If it is a book for non-Christians, it fails to present a clear Gospel message. It asks the reader to receive Christ, but it does not mention sin, repentance, or even the cross. Since the book is so popular, it warrants a careful analysis.

## **Doctrine**

Rick Warren minimizes the importance of doctrine and glosses over doctrinal differences. For unity's sake we must never let differences divide us. We must stay focused on what matters most - learning to love each other as Christ has loved us, and fulfilling God's five purposes for each of us and his church. Warren never warns the believers to watch out for false doctrine. He says that when we stand before the Judgment Seat of Christ, "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?" (p.34). This statement is inaccurate. What one believes determines how one thinks and acts. Doctrinal purity is important because the only truths anyone knows about Jesus Christ and the process of Christian living stem from the doctrines of God's Word.

Furthermore, it appears that action is more important than studying the Scripture. Warren claims, "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." (p.231). He also declares: "Quit studying and discussing your mission and just do it!" (p.301). But should Scripture not form our minds, our approach to mission, and actions? Furthermore, the ministry of the Word seems to take second place to one's personal testimony. In fact, Warren claims one's "personal testimony is more effective than a sermon" (p.290).

## **Psychobabble**

Warren supplements Scripture with self-help advice. On the one hand he repeatedly rejects psychobabble but on the other hand he immerses his readers in it. He claims that "most conflict is rooted in unmet needs. Some of these needs can only be met by God. When you expect anyone - a friend spouse, boss or family member - to meet a need that God can only fulfill, you are setting yourself up for disappointment and bitterness. No one can meet all of your needs except God." (p.154). The Bible does not support the idea that "most conflict is rooted in unmet needs." Christ did not come to meet unmet needs. The Bible describes man as a sinner who does not even truly know what he needs. He is a sinner in need of salvation. And I was surprised to read that Gideon suffered from low esteem. "Gideon's weakness was low self-esteem and deep insecurities but God transformed him into a "*mighty man of valor*" (Judges 6:12)" (p.275). Furthermore, Warren claims that much confusion in the Christian life comes from ignoring the simple truth that God is far more interested in building your character

than he is anything else. He says that "God is far more interested in what you are than in what you do" (p.177). Of course, character development is important. But our response to God should also be obedience and faithfulness.

## **Worship**

Rick Warren gives the impression that worship is relative. How you worship seems to be up to the individual believer. "The best style of worship is the one that most authentically represents your love for God, based on the background and personality God gave you" (p.102). Warren also states that the place and style of worship are unimportant. He says, "A Samaritan woman once tried to debate Jesus on the best time, place and style for worship. Jesus replied that these external issues are irrelevant" (p.100). Warren correctly states, "Worship isn't for you. It's for God" (p.60) while he also says, "We worship God by enjoying him" (p.55). In other words, the focus of worship is on our enjoyment of God rather than on God Himself. But worship is all about God, not about us. If one follows Warren's view, worship becomes self-styled and subjective. The Bible calls us to worship God in truth. We must worship in accordance to precepts in Scripture. Furthermore, the church has a long liturgical tradition.

## **Mishandling of Scripture**

The late A.W. Tozer once observed that of all the books in the world, the one most quoted, most misunderstood and most misapplied is the Bible. He noted that a careless or irreverent use of the words of the Bible can do no good and may do irreparable harm. His observation describes Warren's use of Scripture. The *Purpose Driven Life* contains nearly a thousand quotations from Scripture. To get his message across Warren used fifteen different translations and paraphrases. He says that he "deliberately used paraphrases in order to help you see God's truth in new, *fresh* ways. English-speaking people should thank God that we have so many different versions to use for devotional reading." But a Bible version and a paraphrase are two different things. A version is a translation from the original languages. If the Bible is rendered from the original Hebrew and Greek into English, it is a translation. A literal translation is an attempt to express, as far as possible, the exact meaning of the original words of the text being translated. A paraphrase is a "free" or "loose" translation. It attempts to translate idea for idea rather than word for word. Hence, it is more of an interpretation than a translation. In recent years some Bible translations known as amplified or expanded translations have contained implicit, and sometimes explicit, commentary within the text of the translation itself. Warren uses the various translations and paraphrases to prove his point, but they often fail to relate even remotely to the meaning of the underlying Hebrew or Greek text.

He either takes passages out of context or simply misinterprets them or finds a translation of paraphrases that back his claim. His method leads to a careless and wanton mishandling of Scripture. Let me use a few examples:

*Genesis 6:8*

The NIV translation states, "Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord." God did not choose Noah because of his goodness. He was the recipient of God's grace or unmerited favor. Warren uses the *Living Bible* paraphrase, which says that "Noah was a pleasure to the Lord." According to the *Living Bible*, Noah is spared due to his goodness. Warren says that Noah is the kind of man that makes God smile. (Cf. Chapter 9 "What makes God Smile?"). In other words, Warren transforms this text into good works. He twists the marvelous doctrine of grace.

#### *Jeremiah 29:11*

"Wonderful changes are going to happen in your life as you begin to live it on purpose. God says, 'I know what I am planning for you. I will give you hope and a good future.'" (p.31). Warren cites this text from the *New Century Version* several times in his book, but this verse has nothing to say whatsoever about the wonderful changes that will occur in a believer once he lives out his purpose. This text refers to the people of Israel in Babylonian captivity. It is not a general promise for all people at all times.

#### *Ezekiel 3:18*

Rick Warren says, "You may have been unaware that God holds you responsible for the unbelievers around you. The Bible says, 'You must warn them so they may live. If you don't speak out to warn the wicked to stop their evil ways, they will die in their sin. But I will hold you responsible for their death.'" (p.283). Warren's claim that believers are responsible for the spiritual death of unbelievers and friends is contrary to Scripture. This text has been used often by evangelicals to put a guilt trip on Christians. Personal evangelism is important, but the believer is never held responsible for the unbeliever's lost condition. The text refers to the responsibility of the prophet as the watchman over Israel. As the context shows, it refers to his duty to warn the wicked.

“<sup>16</sup> At the end of seven days the word of the LORD came to me: <sup>17</sup> "Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me. <sup>18</sup> When I say to a wicked man, 'You will surely die,' and you do not warn him or speak out to dissuade him from his evil ways in order to save his life, that wicked man will die for his sin, and I will hold you accountable for his blood.”

#### *John 17:4*

Jesus reported to His Father, "I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do." According to Warren, Jesus was not referring to the atonement. Jesus referred to "preparing his disciples to live for God's purposes."... "Jesus modeled a purpose-driven life, and he taught others how to live it, too. That was the "work" that brought glory to God." (p.310). But in His high priestly prayer Jesus was not referring to the preparation of His disciples to live God's purposes, Jesus looked forward to the Cross. For Jesus the Cross was the glory of life and the way to the glory of eternity. Jesus repeatedly spoke of the Cross as His glory and glorification. He finished the work of

redemption, perfectly satisfying the righteous and holy character of God by bearing our sins on the cross.

## **Conclusion**

Rick Warren focuses on five purposes for our being on earth. But the most important element in the purpose of human life is glorifying God. The *means* by which a believer glorifies God must never become the *purpose* for existence. Obviously, I cannot recommend *The Purpose Driven Life* to our readers.