

Book Review

Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life: What on Earth am I Here For?* Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002. Cloth. 334pp. \$19.99.

Introduction

In the last year a flurry of churches have advertised “40 Days of Purpose” programs across the nation. The 40 Days campaign is based upon Rick Warren’s best-selling book, *The Purpose Driven Life*. Last year Warren’s book sold eleven million copies and remained on the New York Times best seller list for forty-four weeks. What is the purpose driven life?

Warren argues that he has simply taken the Westminster Shorter Catechism’s first answer, “Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever,” and extended it into a devotional book. There are positive aspects about Warren’s book, such as his emphasis upon the need to glorify God in all that we do. He writes that the five purposes of the believer’s life are bringing glory to God by worshipping him, loving other believers, becoming like Christ, serving others, and telling others about him (pp. 55-57). These five purposes constitute the overall aim of his book. Generally speaking, these are noble goals. Yet, there are considerable problems with Warren’s book that obscure the five goals. There are four major areas that present problems: a self-centered focus, doctrinal errors, mishandling of Scripture, and self-promotion and marketing.

Self-centered focus

The first area of problem involves a self-centered focus that runs throughout the book. This is quite evident by the number of times the first and second-person personal pronouns appear at strategic points. Though Warren tries to point readers in a God-ward direction, there are points that conflict with this goal. Notice in the thesis statement of the book the emphasis upon the person rather than God:

“This is more than a book; it is a guide to a 40-day spiritual journey that will enable *you* to discover the answer to life’s most important questions: What on earth am *I* here for? 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. Having this perspective will reduce *your* stress, simplify *your* decisions, increase *your* satisfaction, and most important, prepare *you* for eternity” (p. 9; emphasis).

The appeal in this statement is to the individual; the individual reaps the benefits. It is difficult to square this path with that of the cross: “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Matt. 16.24). This same self-centered approach surfaces again in Warren’s instructions regarding the importance of personal evangelism. It is difficult to square Warren’s model of evangelism with what we see in Scripture. Warren centers evangelism, not upon the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, but upon the personal experience of the believer. Paul wanted to nothing but “Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2.2) and wanted to preach nothing but “Christ crucified” (1 Cor. 1.23). Moreover, Paul saw the inextricable bond between the Gospel

and preaching: “But how are they to call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching” (Rom. 10.14)? Paul instructed Timothy to be prepared to preach both in and out of season (2 Tim. 4.2). Why? Because he knew that Christ manifests himself through the preaching of the Word (Tit. 1.3).

Warren, by contrast, instructs his readers that, their “personal testimony is more effective than a sermon, because unbelievers see pastors as professional salesmen, but see you as a ‘satisfied customer,’ so they give you more credibility” (p. 290). To support his claim that personal testimony is more powerful than a sermon, he argues that “many who won’t accept the authority of the Bible will listen to a humble, personal story.” For this reason he suggests that the reader memorize his personal testimony: “(1) What *my* life was like before *I* met Jesus; (2) How *I* realized *I* needed Jesus; (3) How *I* committed *my* life to Jesus; (4) The difference Jesus has made in *my* life” (p. 291; emphasis). While sharing personal testimony is certainly not incorrect, Warren makes it foundational. Can the Gospel be effectively communicated through a model of consumer satisfaction? “Jesus did great things for me, shouldn’t you benefit too?” While Christ is at the center of Warren’s evangelism, so too is the believer, not as an unworthy recipient of God’s saving grace but as a satisfied customer. What about the second problem area?

Doctrinal problems

Though space does not allow me to engage completely each of Warren’s doctrinal errors, I can nevertheless point them out. Warren states that “life on earth is just the dress rehearsal before the real production” (p. 36). This statement conflicts with what the Scriptures say about life and history. Is the plain of history really only a dress rehearsal? Does this not diminish God’s ordination of and incarnation in history? Warren gets dangerously close to the ancient heresy of Marcionism, the belief that there were two different gods of Scripture—a wrathful god of the Old Testament and a loving god of the New: “Fear of God, not friendship, was more common in the Old Testament” (p. 86). Is not fear of the LORD the beginning of knowledge and wisdom” (Prov. 1.7; Job 28.28)? Were only OT saints to fear God? Was not Abraham, an OT saint, God’s friend (James 2.23)? At one point Warren leaves the reader wondering whether our eternal existence will be disembodied: “Like God, we are spiritual beings—our spirits are immortal and will outlast our earthly bodies” (pp. 171-72). The Scriptures are clear—we will receive glorified bodies just like Christ (1 Cor. 15). Concerning worship, he writes that “anything you do that brings pleasure to God is an act of worship” (p. 64). Yet, at the same time he also argues that “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). At this point, Warren has created a two conflicting interests—can we really say that what pleases us is always that which pleases God? Worship is only further confused when Warren writes that “every activity can be transformed into an act of worship when you do it for the praise, glory, and pleasure of God.” He also argues that “work becomes worship when you dedicate it to God and perform it with an awareness of his presence” (p. 67). While we should certainly do everything to the glory of God, this does not mean that every activity is an act of worship. Is juggling worship? Should it follow the sermon

or the opening hymn? If work can be worship, then what is the point of the Sabbath or attending church? What about the third problem area?

Mishandling Scripture

Warren's most problematic area concerns his interpretation of Scripture. At many crucial points he appeals to Scripture incorrectly. What contributes to his mishandling of Scripture is his use of over fifteen versions of the Bible. His rationale for using so many versions is he wants to meet people where they are; in other words, some versions of the Scriptures appeal to different people (pp. 325-36). While it is certainly legitimate to use different versions of Scripture, the chief criterion should be whether the version accurately translates the underlying Hebrew or Greek. Some of the versions to which Warren appeals are not translations but paraphrases, which often distort the meaning of Scripture. Additionally Warren often quotes portions of verses, which wrenches them out of their context stripping them of their meaning.

Warren, for example, appeals to the Sermon on the Mount: "A paraphrase of Jesus' seventh beatitude says, 'You're blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That's when you discover who you really are, and your place in God's family'" (pp. 157-58). Warren quotes Matthew 5.9 using *The Message*, which is a paraphrase of Scripture, not a translation. This is a distortion of what Christ said. Christ is not telling people that they should cultivate peace between men. If this was the case, then should not work as a United Nations peacekeeper be a Christian's highest calling? Rather, peacemakers are blessed by God because they bring peace, not between men but between men and God. Paul writes: "Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 5.1). What good is peace among men if they are at enmity with God? Another example of poor Scripture interpretation comes with Warren's explanation of Genesis 9.1, 3, when God remanded the dominion mandate to Noah: "God said, 'It's time to get on with your life! Do the things I designed humans to do. Make love to your spouse. Have babies. Raise families. Plant crops and eat meals. Be humans! This is what I made you to be'" (p. 74). To put it mildly, Warren's explanation has nothing to do with the dominion mandate. God reissued the dominion mandate to Noah, a type of Jesus Christ, to foreshadow the work of Christ, that he would fill the earth with people who bore his image and extend the temple to the ends of the earth, and to demonstrate that man was incapable of fulfilling this command. This is why God reissues the dominion mandate as a covenantal promise to Abraham instead of a command (Gen. 12, 15). This leaves us with the last of the problem areas.

Self-promotion and marketing

One of the elements that strike the reader is the self-promotion and marketing that is present throughout the book. In the back of the book, for example, there are advertisements for audio and e-versions of the book, as well as Warren's previous book, *The Purpose Driven Church*. There is also a line of Purpose Driven Life® products that includes a journal, memory verse cards, two music albums, video curriculum, seminars, health assessment, and large and small group curriculums. In addition to this, at various points Warren encourages his readers to use and purchase these materials (pp. 11, 136,

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189, 307, 323-24). This is not the only marketing element that accompanies the book. Along with the many Purpose Driven Life® products there is the 40 Days of Purpose campaign for the local church. In October of 2003 alone over 4,000 churches launched their 40 Days of Purpose campaigns. What many people do not know is that in order for a church to be able to advertise the campaign, they have to pay a fee of \$750 to \$1,150, depending on the size of the congregation, to the publisher. That means for October 2003, Zondervan profited between 3 to 4.6 million dollars from churches advertising the campaign. When you add the prospects of millions of dollars per month from churches offering the campaign, the 165 million dollars in book sale revenues, plus the possibilities greater profits from other related merchandise, the publishers have created a financial windfall. The problem here is that the Gospel and millions of dollars of profit are strange bedfellows. In Warren's defense, he does not receive the royalties from the books used by churches, and the royalties from those sold in stores go to a non-profit para-church ministry that he started. Nevertheless, the Gospel is free. It is one thing to make enough money to cover expenses, but for a publisher to sell the book in the name of "ministry" and "evangelism" and at the same time rake in hundreds of millions of dollars appears to be grossly inconsistent with the teaching of Scripture (2 Cor. 2.17).

Conclusion

While there are some positive aspects of Warren's book, they are significantly outweighed by the negative aspects. While the book claims to be God-centered, it is difficult to harmonize this claim with its consumer driven and self-centered approach. For these reasons, Warren's book cannot be recommended.