

The Purpose Driven Life, by Rick Warren

Review by 9Marks Paul Alexander

I) INTRODUCTION

Books on living the Christian life are a dime a dozen. The shelves of Christian bookstores bow under the weight of myriad titles promising freedom from bondage, secrets of debt free living, keys to loving other people, and a whole host of other practical matters. But the one that has weighed in most heavily of late is Rick Warren's recent release *The Purpose Driven Life* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002; hardcover, \$19.99). Even more than its predecessor *The Purpose Driven Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995. Hardcover, \$19.99), *Life* has become a full-fledged popular phenomenon, almost to the point of becoming a movement in itself. Whereas *Church* sold over a million copies in fewer than ten years, *Life* has reportedly sold 11 million copies in fewer than two years – that's 15,068 copies every day for two years! Pastors are giving it two thumbs up from the pulpit, quoting it at length and encouraging Bible study groups to read it together. But *Life* has transcended the evangelical community, rising to the top of both the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* Bestseller Lists, and being featured on display tables at Barnes & Noble's and even in the aisles of Wal-Mart. If any Christian book has been wildly popular among both evangelical circles and the culture at large, this is it.

II) SUMMARY OF BOOK

The Purpose Driven Life is designed as a forty day spiritual journey – one chapter a day – with the goal of answering the question “What on earth am I here for?” (p15). The question is broad enough to address both believer and unbeliever alike, which may in part explain the width of its appeal. Warren's first section serves as a primer to the question. His goal is to prepare the reader to answer the two questions God will pose to him on the last day: What did you do with Jesus, and what did you do with what God gave you (p34)? Since life is about bringing glory to God (p53), the question to be answered is “How can I bring glory to God?” (p55). The answer is by worshiping Him, loving other believers, becoming like Christ, serving others with our gifts, and telling others about Him (pp55-57). The remaining five sections flesh out these ideas respectively. The most useful summary is given by Warren himself on p306, working from the Great Commandment (Matt 22:37-40) and the Great Commission (Matt 28:18-20).

1. **“Love God with all your Heart”**: You were planned for God's pleasure, so your purpose is to love God through *worship*.

2. **“Love your neighbor as yourself”**: You were shaped for serving, so your purpose is to show love for others through *ministry*.
3. **“Go and make disciples”**: You were made for a mission, so your purpose is to share God’s message through *evangelism*.
4. **“Baptize them into...”**: You were formed for God’s family, so your purpose is to identify with his church through *fellowship*.
5. **“Teach them to do all things...”**: You were created to become like Christ, so your purpose is to grow to maturity through *discipleship* (all emphases his).

Worship is not about what pleases us, but about what makes God smile. God smiles when we love, trust, obey, and praise Him, and when we use our abilities for His glory (pp70-76). “The heart of worship is surrender.... Offering yourself to God is what worship is all about” (p78, citing Rom 12:1-2). Since “God wants to be your best friend”, Warren gives some practical suggestions for developing that friendship through prayer, meditation, honesty, and obedience (pp85-113).

Fellowship is symbolized by baptism, and designed to teach us how to love (pp117-129). Since the life of a body is contained in the cells, “every Christian needs to be involved in a small group within their church....This is where real community takes place, not in the big gatherings” (p139). Real fellowship is characterized by authenticity, mutuality, sympathy, and mercy (p143). But cultivating this kind of community takes honesty, humility, courtesy, confidentiality, and frequency (pp145-151). It also takes an ability to restore broken relationships and protect the unity of the church (pp152-167).

Discipleship is about “taking on [God’s] values, attitudes, and character” (p172). We grow by making good decisions (p174), by allowing God to transform the way we think through His Spirit and our repentance (p182), by abiding in God’s word (pp185-192), and by persevering through trouble and temptation (pp192-223).

Ministry is our service to believers (see p281). It is not an optional extra of the Christian life (p233), and it is in large part what gives our lives meaning and significance (pp228, 232). We begin to understand how God means for us to serve when we understand our SHAPE: our Spiritual gifts, Heart, Abilities, Personality, and Experience (p236-256). Yet mature Christian servant-hood realizes that God often calls us to secondary ministries based on “wherever [we’re] needed at the moment” rather than on our SHAPE (p257-270).

Evangelism is our service to unbelievers (p281). Fulfilling the evangelistic mandate God has given you will require abandoning your life agenda for God’s (p286). But failing to do so will mean wasting your life (p285). Personal evangelism, then, is to be accomplished by sharing your life message, which includes your testimony, your life lessons, your godly passions, and the good news (pp289-295); and it should be accompanied by an increasingly global

concern for the unsaved, which is ideally caught by going on a short term missions trip (p304).

Balancing these five purposes is the key to persevering and succeeding in the Christian life. “Blessed are the balanced; they shall outlast everyone” (p305). To achieve that balance, we need to discuss these ideas with others, record our life lessons through the discipline of journaling, and write out a specific life purpose statement that includes each of these five biblical purposes (pp305-319).

III) HELPFUL INSIGHTS

Warren gives even the careful Christian reader a lot to agree with. First, he combats the self-centeredness and wrong individualism characteristic of Americans today. The first sentence of his first chapter, “It’s not about you” (p17), is a breath of fresh air, especially amid the smog of evangelistic methods and church marketing strategies that peddle the Gospel by appealing to the masses. He rightly points out later that we’re naturally self-absorbed and almost all advertising encourages us to think of ourselves” (p299). His prescription of “moment-by-moment dependence on God” encourages us to redirect our gaze from self to Christ.

Second, Warren is careful to maintain the authority of Scripture. He explains at the very outset that discerning our purpose in life should come from revelation rather than speculation (pp19-20). Day 24, entitled “Transformed by Truth”, expounds the importance of Bible intake for making headway in progressive sanctification, claiming in no uncertain terms that “the truth transforms me” (p192). Third, Warren shows an encouraging level of God-centeredness in telling the reader that “the ultimate goal of the universe is to show the glory of God” (p53).

Fourth, Warren reminds the reader that “worship is not for your benefit” (p66). So many divisions in the local church today would be mended if this truth were more widely expounded! Warren promulgates a biblical worldview that says “every human activity, except sin, can be done for God’s pleasure if you do it with an attitude of praise” (p74). He is also spot on when he says that “the most common mistake Christians make in worship today is seeking an experience rather than seeking God. They look for a feeling, and if it happens, they conclude that they have worshiped. Wrong! In fact, God often removes our feelings so we won’t depend on them. Seeking a feeling, even the feeling of closeness to Christ, is not worship” (p109). Amen!

Fifth, Warren rightly understands the centrality of the local congregation to the growth of the individual believer when he affirms that “love cannot be learned in isolation” (p124). And he rightly understands the priority of the local church in the evangelistic plan of God when he says that “The church is God’s agenda for the world” (p132). Sixth, in a culture where

comfort is king, Warren is helpful in reminding us that “God’s ultimate goal for your life on earth is not comfort, but character development” (p173). And finally, Warren is great on the nature and necessity of servant-hood in mature believers (pp257-264). He explodes the myth that selfless service is an optional part of Christian maturity, and awakens the reader to understand that “fulfilling your [evangelistic] mission will require that you abandon your agenda and accept God’s agenda for your life.... You yield your rights, expectations, dreams, plans, and ambitions to Him” (p286).

IV) DIFFICULTIES

But there are some points of vulnerability, a few of which could prove dangerous to the reader or damaging to Warren’s argument.

A. Interpretive Difficulties

To start at the beginning, we need to read Warren’s last chapter, where he comments on Acts 13:36 as the primary motivating verse for the book. Acts 13:36-37 is part of Paul’s evangelistic argument for understanding Jesus as the Messiah, which he gave at the Jewish synagogue in Pisidian Antioch on his first missionary journey. It reads like this: “David, after he had served the purpose of God in his own generation, fell asleep, and was laid among his fathers and underwent decay; but He whom God raised did not undergo decay.” Warren uses the first part of verse 36 to make the point that

David dedicated his life to fulfilling God’s purposes on earth. There is no greater epitaph than that statement! Imagine it chiseled on your tombstone: That you served God’s purpose in your generation. My prayer is that people will be able to say that about me when I die. It is also my prayer that people will say it about you, too. That is why I wrote this book for you. This phrase is the ultimate definition of a life well lived. You do the eternal and timeless (God’s purpose) in a contemporary way (in your generation). That is what the purpose driven life is all about” (p318).

True, David served God’s purpose in his generation. But the point of the passage is not “David was good, so be like him.” The point is Christ’s supremacy over David as shown by His resurrection, which proved that Jesus is the Messiah – the true and eternal King of Israel. The application, then, is not that we should emulate David; it’s that we should exalt Christ. The motivating verse is misinterpreted as a moralism.

B. Evangelistic Difficulties

1. The audience is ambiguous.

The most significant difficulty has to do with the ambiguity of Warren's intended audience, and the way he seeks to evangelize the unbelieving reader. Warren seems to address his book to both believers and unbelievers alike. The question "what on earth am I here for?" is equally addressable to both Christians and non-Christians, and the fact that Warren intends to address at least unbelievers is clear from the prayer to receive Christ that he offers them on pp58-59. Yet Warren tells the reader on p44 that "the good news is that God wants you to pass the tests of life, so he never allows the tests you face to be greater than the grace he gives you to handle them." Who is Warren talking to here – believers, unbelievers, or both? Warren continues: "Every time you pass a test, God notices and makes plans to reward you in eternity." But God doesn't do that for unbelievers, does He? Or again, "If you treat every day as a trust, God promises three rewards in eternity" (p45). But this simply isn't true for those who have not repented and believed in the Gospel. The cart seems to be in front of the horse.

2. The Gospel is presented unclearly.

The Gospel presentation on pp58-59 serves as the fulcrum of the book, where Warren ends his primer on the question of life's purpose in chapter seven and begins expounding the five biblical purposes of the Purpose Driven Life in the chapters that remain. What we want to see at this pivot, then, is a clear articulation of both the Gospel and the saving response to it (repentance and belief) so that the unbeliever does not continue reading under the moralistic assumption that being a good boy by carrying out these five purposes is what will save him from the power and penalty of his sin. But repentance is tepidly presented in the following terms. "Living the rest of your life for the glory of God will require a change in your priorities, your schedule, your relationships, and everything else. It will sometimes mean choosing a difficult path instead of an easy one" (p57). This is all true, of course. But there is no mention of either sin or repentance here. True, Warren does require change. But biblical repentance is always and self-consciously a turning away specifically from *sin*, not just from amoral priorities or value neutral relationships. He goes on to tell the unbeliever that "Real life begins by committing yourself completely to Jesus Christ. If you are not sure you have done this, all you need to do is receive and believe [quoting John 1:12]" (p58). Still no repentance. Warren may intend to communicate the necessity of repentance from sin by talking about a change in priorities and relationships, but he undermines that intention by saying "ALL you need to do is receive and believe". That is not all – you need to repent as well.

Believing is expounded in the following terms: "Believe God has chosen you to have a relationship with Jesus, who died on the cross for you. Believe that no matter what you've

done, God wants to forgive you” (p58). Yet no clear connection is made between Christ’s death and the reader’s forgiveness. Indeed, there has been no explanation of why the unbeliever would even need forgiveness. Granted, Warren clearly says that “Jesus died on the cross for you.” But a biblically illiterate unbeliever doesn’t even know yet that he deserves to die for his sins. He is still left asking the fundamental questions of the Gospel. “What do I need to be forgiven for? Who is Jesus? Why did Jesus have to die on the cross for me? Do I really deserve death for my sins? How could Jesus die the death that I deserved? Why does God accept Jesus’ death as mine? Why couldn’t someone else die for me instead of Jesus?” Without answering those questions, the phrase “Jesus died on the cross for you” is open to be interpreted by the postmodern reader in whatever way he chooses. The Gospel has not yet been defined biblically.

Receiving Christ is expounded like this: “Receive Jesus into your life as your Lord and Savior. Receive his forgiveness for your sins. Receive his Spirit, who will give you the power to fulfill your life purpose [quoting John 3:36 MSG]” (p58). Here sin and forgiveness are verbally mentioned, which is great; but there still has been no clear explanation of who Jesus is, nor of why our unrepentant sin offends God and makes relationship with him impossible (i.e., because of His holiness), nor of the righteous anger that our unrepentant sin elicits from Him, nor of death as the outworking of that anger and as the penalty for our sin, nor of the relationship of Christ’s death to the forgiveness of another person’s sins and their reconciliation to God.

With the Gospel left vague and no repentance required, the rest of the book is built on the precarious assumption of the reader’s conversion. “You are a child of God, and you bring pleasure to God like nothing else he has ever created” (p63).

At this point someone may very well object: “Give the brother a break, will you?! He told them Jesus died for them! What else do you want him to do, sit the non-Christian down in a seminary class before he can be converted?” Maybe our outspoken friend has a point. After all, no one really understands the full implications of deciding to follow Christ the moment they repent and believe. Yet the person and work of Jesus Christ are the very objects in which the unbeliever is to place his faith. Saving faith is not blind. No, in fact it is a kind of faith that has its eyes wide open – opened by the Holy Spirit to the uncompromising holiness and unbending justice of God; to the reality and offensiveness of my sin in God’s sight; to God’s righteous and terrifying anger at my sin; to the need for an eternal Other to suffer my eternally damning sentence that I might be forever acquitted; and to my need to repent of my sins and trust in Christ’s death as God’s provision for my forgiveness and reconciliation to Him. Warren’s presentation of the Gospel simply doesn’t give the unbeliever enough to go on.

3. Assurance of salvation is encouraged prematurely.

Warren continues:

Wherever you are reading this, 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.’ Go ahead. If you sincerely meant that prayer, congratulations! Welcome to the family of God! You are now ready to discover and start living God’s purpose for your life” (pp58-59).

The rest of the book, then, assumes that the unbelieving reader prayed the prayer, and that praying the prayer ensures that the reader is now a *bona fide* Christian.

Even if the Gospel and its required response had been sufficiently explained, the unbeliever is now told that his internal assurance of salvation and the affirmation of his conversion by others are dependent on the mere sincerity of his prayer. “If you sincerely meant that prayer, congratulations! Welcome to the family of God! You are now ready to discover and start living God’s purpose for your life” (pp58-59). But we are never told in Scripture that if we pray a prayer once, we should feel assured of our own salvation (this is not what 1John 1:9 teaches). Nor are we ever told that one prayer will “change our eternity.” The praying of a prayer is not what we should be encouraging people to rely on for assurance of salvation. We will know others, and ourselves, by our fruits (Matt 7:15-27; 1John 2:3-6; James 2:14-26; 2Peter 1:10-11). Genuine conversion is only discerned by the fruit that true repentance bears over time.

4. The purposes degenerate into moralisms.

If all this is true, then the rest of the book is a mere moralism for the unbelieving reader, even though the purposes are clearly biblical, because the person who prayed Warren’s prayer isn’t really converted. He has not heard a clear presentation of the Gospel. He has not heard how to respond savingly to that Gospel by the graces of repentance from sin and trust in Christ. Yet he is being invited to “make pleasing God the goal of [his] life” (p76), and being told that “living on purpose is the only way to live” (p312). Warren tells the unbeliever how he should live, but does not clearly tell him what he should do to be saved or where he can find the power to live such a life. Such ambiguity obscures the Gospel of grace and confuses unbelievers as to what it means to be a Christian. Praying a prayer, even if it does include an articulation of repentance, isn’t what saves. It is Christ’s redeeming person and work that saves; our continual repentance and belief, both of which are gifts of God (Acts 11:18; Eph 2:8-9; 2Peter 1:1), are what plunge us into the stream of God’s redeeming grace. A prayer – even a sincere one – may or may not be evidence of the saving faith James writes of in James 2.

Warren is certainly right in fully intending to share the gospel before he begins to expound the purposes of the Christian life. But encouraging assurance of salvation where there is not even the bud, much less the fruit, of repentance is one of the biggest problems in American evangelicalism today. The purposes that Warren propagates are solidly biblical purposes, and every Christian should be concerned with them. The problem is that they become moralisms *in the absence of a clear Gospel presentation*.

5. Conversion is confused with living on purpose.

Because the Gospel presentation is cloudy, conversion is easily confused with living on purpose. “There are no unspiritual abilities, just misused ones. Start using yours for God’s pleasure” (p75). I am sure Warren does not intend to communicate that using our abilities for God’s pleasure is the essence of salvation, but that’s how it would read to an unbeliever without a more crystallized articulation of the Gospel. Starting to use my abilities for God’s pleasure is not a saving response to the Gospel if unaccompanied by repentance. It is righteousness by works. Or again, “Will you make pleasing God the goal of your life?” (p76) It’s a good question, but because the Gospel has not been laid out clearly, it could easily be understood as implying that I’ll be saved and my life here will get better if I just make pleasing God the goal of my life, notwithstanding my unrepentant heart. Even prior to his Gospel presentation, Warren confuses the idea of living on purpose with the reality of conversion. “Nothing matters more than knowing God’s purposes for your life, and nothing can compensate for not knowing them.... The greatest tragedy is not death, but life without purpose” (p30). But surely the greatest tragedy is neither death nor life without purpose, but both life and death without responding to the Gospel in repentance and belief.

Yet someone might still say, “Isn’t living on purpose as Warren defines it – worship, evangelism, fellowship, discipleship, and ministry – really the same thing as repentance? If someone is doing all those things, how can you say they’re not living a repentant lifestyle? Quit playing word games and get on with fulfilling the Great Commission!” Maybe our outspoken friend is right again. Maybe this is all simply a matter of terminology, and Warren just isn’t quite using the vocabulary that I’d like him to. Yet I can’t help but think that every one of these purposes can be engaged in hypocritically. People do it every day. They read their Bibles, sing songs at church with a tear in their eye, give to the missions fund, maybe even share their faith at work and go on a short term missions trip, all the while harboring and hiding years of unrepentant sin under the floorboards of their hearts. Repentance isn’t just doing all the right things externally. It’s also turning away from the wrong things internally.

Repentance doesn’t get any more treatment until page 182, as a part of progressive sanctification. “To be like Christ you must develop the mind of Christ. The New Testament calls this mental shift repentance, which in Greek literally means ‘to change your mind.’ You repent whenever you change the way you think by adopting how God thinks” (p182). This is

certainly a more accurate picture of repentance, though still lacking the specific connection with sin. Yet is repentance only supposed to happen after conversion? No, repentance is part and parcel of conversion, which means that calling unbelievers to it is fundamental to preaching the Gospel of Christ accurately (Mark 1:14-15). The Christian pastor is therefore on dangerous ground to follow Warren in waiting to clearly call people to repentance from sin until after he has convinced them that they have been converted without it. When we delay the call for repentance, we confuse the meaning of both evangelism and conversion, unwittingly deceiving people that they have either shared the Gospel faithfully without requiring repentance, or that they have responded to the Gospel savingly without rendering it.

6. Conversion is confused with a deep desire to please God.

“What God looks at is the attitude of your heart – is pleasing him your deepest desire?... Will you make pleasing God the goal of your life? There is nothing that God won’t do for the person totally absorbed with this goal” (p76). This sounds great, and I agree that God does not look at mere outward appearances, but that our affections and attitudes matter to Him. But the integrity or sincerity of my desire to please God is not fundamentally what God looks at as saving – otherwise salvation would not be wholly of grace, as Warren would wholeheartedly agree, and millions of devout Muslims would be on their way to heaven, which Warren would wholeheartedly deny. A person can have a deep desire to please God, but without repentance from sin and belief in Jesus Christ alone as the one who has paid the penalty for that sin, no one is converted.

Also, sometimes when God looks at my heart, He sees sin – pride, covetousness, bitterness, anger, lust – the whole nine yards, even though I am a Christian. The elements of my old nature are all still there inside me, even though I am sad and sometimes embarrassed to admit it, and even though God has dealt the decisive blow to my old nature in the death and resurrection of Christ. So, what if pleasing God isn’t always my deepest desire? What does God think of me *then*? What God looks at in my heart cannot be only my desires. If that were the case, it would be impossible for anyone to be saved. But praise God, what He looks at is the righteousness of his own perfect Son, which He credited to my account by grace through faith so that I can be acquitted before the bar of His unbending justice (2Cor 5:21). That is what it means to be converted. Only now can we begin to think about living on purpose in the light of the gospel of God’s grace in Christ.

C. Discipling Dangers

1. Only the Gospel has driving power for the individual Christian.

Warren’s primary objective is to show the reader “how to live a purpose-driven life – a life guided, controlled, and directed by God’s purposes” (p30). The definition assumes that

purpose has power to drive the believer forward in the Christian life. Yet even God's purposes do not have driving power to accomplish themselves. God accomplishes His purposes through the instrumentality of His effective word. So we read in Isa 55:10-11, For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there without watering the earth and making it bear and sprout, and furnishing seed to the sower and bread to the eater; So will My word be which goes forth from My mouth; it will not return to Me empty, without accomplishing what I desire, and without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it.

This passage from Isaiah is the reason that we cannot resolve the difficulty by simply equating God's purpose with the Gospel: the distinction between the two is clarified here in that God's word is what accomplishes God's purposes. The two are clearly distinct in God's own mind – God sends His word to accomplish His purposes. We see the same active instrumentality of the Gospel in the New Testament (Acts 20:32; Rom 1:16; 1Cor 1:18; Col 1:5-6; Heb 4:12; James 1:18; 1Peter 1:23-25).

What this means, however, is that the Gospel is what enables our participation in God's purposes. The Christian life is therefore not driven by purpose; it is driven by the Gospel.

2. The primacy of the Gospel is replaced with the primacy of purpose.

The definition of the Purpose Driven Life (p30) also assumes there is nothing more fundamental by which the Christian should be guided than God's purposes as Warren understands and defines them. Yet behind all those purposes is the Gospel.

The Gospel not only enables our participation in God's purposes; it regulates and informs our participation in them as well, determining who we seek unity with, who we are disciplined by, who we cooperate with in evangelism, how we go about the task of evangelism, and the way we go about fulfilling both the Great Commandment and the Great Commission. When the primacy of the Gospel is replaced by purpose, the gospel ceases to regulate our participation in those purposes. We risk getting the kind of wrong ecumenism that comes from uniting with other churches around the purpose of evangelism without first making sure that a common, biblical understanding of the Gospel is shared, both among the cooperating churches and with the subjects of our evangelism. We risk getting worship that displeases God because it comes into His presence on the misperception of our merit rather than the recognition of our rebellion. We risk getting fellowship grounded more in common demographics or even goals than in a common understanding and experience of the

Gospel's transforming power. We risk getting discipleship that teaches holiness by effort instead of grace. We risk getting love that is too tolerant to offend.

None of this is to insinuate in the least that either Warren or Saddleback has made any of these mistakes by making purpose primary. But it is not difficult to see the potential for such error in comments like this one: "If we concentrate on loving each other and fulfilling God's purposes, harmony results" (p162). At one level this is true; but it is reductionistic. Warren obviously intends to encourage unity here, but neither love nor unity is distinctively Christian if it is not regulated by a common, accurate understanding of what the Christian Gospel is and the response it entails.

3. Worship is misunderstood as surrender.

Warren articulates a robustly active view of worship on p74. But on p75 he equates offering the self to God with surrender, and on p77 he says "The heart of worship is surrender" (citing Rom 12:1-2). Yet offering yourself as a specifically *living* sacrifice is different than the totally passive idea of surrender. Warren claims that "surrendering to God is not passive resignation, fatalism, or an excuse for laziness" (p80). But just one page later he elaborates that "You let go and let God work" (p81) as a summary of what it means to rely on God without feeling as if you need to be in control. Warren does say at the end of the chapter that sometimes surrendering will mean "doing inconvenient, unpopular, costly, or seemingly impossible tasks" (p84). But using the language of surrender to talk about things that require activity is more confusing than helpful.

4. "Real community" is decentralized from the gathered congregation.

"The body of Christ, like your own body, is really a collection of many small cells. The life of the body of Christ, like your body, is contained in the cells. For this reason, every Christian needs to be involved in a small group within their church.... This is where real community takes place, not in the big gatherings" (p139). Yet *ekklesia*, the Greek word for church, means "gathering". The church is the community of God, God's program for both evangelism and discipleship. Jesus may have gathered twelve disciples, but we are never commanded anywhere in Scripture to form small groups, nor are we told that "real community" happens anywhere other than the church gathered, the *ekklesia*. Participation in small groups may be wise and helpful, but the small group structure is not biblically commanded. The *ekklesia* is where we grow, in part, perhaps, because that is where we learn to love people quite unlike us, people with whom we may share little other than the Gospel. When we break the church into cells or small groups, they are almost always affinity or geographically based. But to encourage the idea that "real" community only happens in groups based on affinity or geography ignores and almost seems to contradict

the unifying power of the Gospel among people that share little or nothing in common except saving faith in Christ.

Authenticity, mutuality, sympathy, and mercy are all correctly touted as indispensable ingredients of Christian community. But accountability – confrontation and confession of known sin, along with encouragement to repent and grow – is oddly absent. We're then told that community takes commitment, honesty, humility, courtesy, confidentiality, and frequency (pp145-151); but we are never told that our fellowship is distinctively in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I could find everything from authenticity to frequency in a rotary club if I wanted to. Without the Gospel – without persevering repentance from sin and continuing belief in Jesus' substitutionary, atoning death and resurrection as that which acquits me of my sin before God – there is nothing distinctively Christian about any community – or even those who make it up.

5. Discipleship is reduced to decisions.

"We allow Christ to live through us. 'For this is the secret: Christ lives in you.' How does this happen in real life? Through the choices we make. We choose to do the right thing in situations and then trust God's Spirit to give us his power, love, faith, and wisdom to do it.... God waits for you to act first" (pp174, 175). I agree that good decisions are part of making headway in progressive sanctification. But if God waited for us to act first, He'd be waiting a pretty long time. We need grace even to make the decision, and that grace comes from God acting first in and for us. God never waits for you to act first (Ezek 36:26-27; Rom 5:8-10; Eph 2:1-6; Phil 2:12-13).

6. Ministry is wrongly identified as the path to significance.

"In God's kingdom, you have a place, a purpose, a role, and a function to fulfill. This gives your life great significance and value" (p228). "Service is the pathway to real significance" (p232). Warren seems to be getting at others-centered living as the most worthwhile way to live. Yet speaking in terms of personal significance is misleading. Personal significance in the Christian life comes from our unchanging status as sons of God, not the task God gives us to do or the varying success with which we meet. Once we start seeking our meaning and significance in our ministry, we are more susceptible to either nauseating pride or deep discouragement. Personal significance comes from the Gospel and what God has done for us – forgiveness, reconciliation to God, His sacrificial love for us – not from what God gives us to "do for Him" in ministry.

7. Gifts are identified as guarantees of God's desires for us.

"What I'm able to do, God wants me to do... God will never ask you to dedicate your life to a task you have no talent for. On the other hand, the abilities you do have are a strong

indication of what God wants you to do with your life” (pp243-244). “Using your shape is the secret of both fruitfulness and fulfillment in ministry... You will be most effective when you use your spiritual gifts and abilities in the area of your heart’s desire, and in a way that best expresses your personality and experiences. The better the fit, the more successful you will be (p248). Maybe, but what about Moses and Jeremiah (Ex 3:11; 4:10; Jer 1:6)? Surely they were good at doing other things. But those things weren’t what God called them to do. I understand what Warren means – usually God works according to the gifts and passions that He has given us; agreed. But to say without qualification that God wants me to do what I’m able to do is misleading – it leaves no room for either waiting on God’s timing to do what I’m good at, or doing something I actually feel ill equipped to do but still needs to be done. Sometimes God calls us to do precisely those things for which we feel ill equipped just to prove that He is the One Who deserves the credit.

8. Evangelism is separated from preaching.

Warren says that “your 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. Personal stories are also easier to relate than principles, and people love to hear them. They capture our attention, and we remember them longer.... Another value of your testimony is that it bypasses intellectual defenses” (p290). Yet Paul can’t conceive of sharing the Gospel apart from preaching the Gospel (Rom 10:14). Personal testimony might very well be an effective way to share the Gospel, if in fact the Gospel is the most prominent part of our testimony, if it is explained sufficiently to be understood by the unbeliever in a biblically accurate way, and if the proper response of repentance and belief is both explained and called for. But if personal testimony is merely a personalized story of how my life got better after I prayed an ambiguous prayer, or if the Gospel is not explained and repentance and belief are not called for, then testimony is as ineffective as beating people over the head with a study Bible.

Warren also laments here that “unbelievers see pastors as professional salesmen.” Yet Warren himself perpetuates this perception by fronting all the benefits of the Purpose Driven Life and going light on repentance. The introduction is representative of the book, promising the unbeliever that the Purpose Driven perspective “will reduce your stress, simplify your decisions, increase your satisfaction, and most important, prepare you for eternity” (p9). A bit later, in a section entitled “The Benefits of Purpose Driven Living”, Warren heralds the Purpose Driven paradigm as able to give meaning to your life, simplify your life, focus your life, motivate your life, and prepare you for eternity (pp30-33). At the end of the day, a felt needs approach to evangelism is about selling unconverted people on the Gospel by showing them how it meets their needs as they perceive and define them, instead of preaching the cross of Christ and calling people to repentance and belief.

V) CONCLUSION

Again, none of this is to disparage the five purposes that Warren promotes. The purposes in themselves are solidly biblical. Nor is any of this to impugn Warren's motives for writing the book.[1] The difficulty is that even though the gospel is not presented clearly to the unbelieving reader Warren presumes to reach, anyone who "prays the prayer" is nevertheless immediately affirmed in their conversion and encouraged in their assurance. Yet even if the Gospel had been presented clearly, the effect of Warren's evangelistic method is to produce questionable converts, and the effect of the Purpose Driven model is to replace the primacy of the gospel with the primacy of purpose. The result is a confusion of conversion with living on purpose, giving the whole book a moralistic flavor that matches the hermeneutic which gave it birth.

The Gospel alone enables and informs our participation in God's purposes. Only the Gospel, then, should be proclaimed as having driving power for the Christian life, and only the Gospel should enjoy primacy in the Christian life. What we need is a *Gospel/ Driven Life*.

[1] In his words, he wants "to explain God's purposes for our lives in the simplest ways." ("A Purpose Driven Phenomena: An Interview with Rick Warren" [ModRef: Jan/Feb 2004, vol. 13, #1]).