

# Should your Church Implement the "Purpose Driven Church" Model?

by Mike Ratliff

(My comment in "blue" type).

I got several requests for the “paper” that I gave my ex-pastor last year about my research into the Purpose Driven Church model. I emailed it to a few people who asked for it then decided to post it. The content below is a modified version of that paper. I have taken out the identities of several people in our old church as well as the church name. Please prayerfully read this. Take your time. I know there is a lot detail here. It took me about two weeks to gather all of this data last year. I pray that the Lord will shine His light of truth into your heart as you read this.

*And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. **And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.** (Acts 2:42-47 ESV)*

There is no doubt that Rick Warren's book, *The Purpose Driven Church*, has had a huge impact on the Protestant Church in the West. If that fact plus the number of churches that have implemented this model was to be the criteria for making this important decision then it would be a no-brainer. However, there is much more to consider.

Rick Warren's understanding of salvation is biblical, he trusts in the sovereignty of God, evangelistic zeal pulsates from his heart, he affirms the inerrancy and sufficiency of Scripture, he believes in regenerate church membership, and he has been practicing church discipline for 21 years now. In fact, his theology matches my own in many ways. Without the Purpose Driven Church Model, Rick Warren would be considered a Reformed Baptist. However, there are several questionable methods implicit within the Purpose Driven Church model that we must consider.

One of the primary functions of the church is presenting the Good News to this lost and dying world. The gospel message is unchanged since the Apostles preached in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2. However, the methods we use to spread the gospel and build the church will not just be determined by our understanding of gospel and church. The relationship is reciprocal. Our methods will in turn play a subtly formative role for those converted under our ministries in their thinking on gospel and church.

For instance, I have been a believer since January 1986. However, my theology has been Reformed for a relatively short period of time. (Spring of 2005) For 19 years, my concept of the gospel and its relationship to church was determined by a very fuzzy and incomplete understanding of theology. However, since God opened my eyes to the realities of His sovereignty in every aspect of salvation, my concern for the appropriateness of how we worship, preach, and teach in our church has changed proportionally.

The Purpose Drive concept is more than an innocuous or isolated add-on to a church's existing ministries. Instead, it is an all-inclusive method for all the ways a Church ministers. The actual spreading of the gospel and building up of the church will be so influenced by this model that those brought to Christ within these ministries will have a conception of the Church and the Gospel deeply marked by it.

There is no arguing with the success Warren has had in his own church. Let's look at his own primary thesis. What is needed today are churches that

are driven by purpose instead of other forces (p80). The method's structure consists of looking at everything through the five New Testament purposes of the church along with the process for fulfilling them. (p80). The five purposes are from Matthew 22:37-40 and the Great Commission found in Matthew 28:18-20. Churches that employ this model must strictly adhere to these five purposes.

Worship love the Lord you God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind (Matthew 22:37)

Ministry – love your neighbor as yourself (Matthew 22:39)

Evangelism go therefore and make disciples (Matthew 28:19)

Fellowship baptizing them (Matthew 28:19, identification with the Christian community)

Discipleship teaching them to obey all that I command you (Matthew 28:20)

On page 86, Warren states that the foundation of such a healthy church is laid by clarifying in the minds of everyone involved exactly why the church exists and what is supposed to do. There is incredible power in having a clearly defined purpose statement. After the foundation of biblical purpose is laid, the pastor must define his purposes, communicate his purposes, organize around them, and apply them.

After this stage, the pastor is walked through the process of implementing this new perspective. He must target his evangelistic audience. He must

attract an un-churched crowd. Then he must meld this together in a process to build up the church.

The church/pastor must determine how to target strategically the segment of the local population that best matches the current make-up of the church. (pp172, 174)

To attract unbelievers Warren suggests that the preaching or teaching needs to be restructured to teach them in interesting and practical ways. (p208) The church's method of worship, preaching, and teaching needs to be scaled and changed to be seeker-sensitive. (p243-244). In fact the actual presentation should be done in completely non-threatening way. The focus should be on showing the unbelievers the benefits of knowing Christ. (p298) The whole restructure must the teaching about God our savior attractive. (pp269-270)

New members' classes will be mandatory in order to make local church membership meaningful. They are asked to sign a membership covenant and encouraged to participate in small groups. Spiritual maturity is then simply a matter of learning certain spiritual exercises and being disciplined to do them until they become habits. (p334)

There is much more. However, let's ask: Should churches be driven by purposes? Should we change our evangelistic methods if they do not work? Is seeker sensitivity in worship a biblical command? Should we use audience analysis to make it easy and attractive for people to become Christians?

**Here are a few interpretive difficulties with this model:**

The Purpose Driven model takes Jesus' ministry as a model for our own in meeting needs as the foundation for evangelism. (p219)

This conception is a common method of various seeker-sensitive models to understand and apply the ministry of Jesus. However, the accounts of Jesus healing miracles were intended to function as messianic markers that proved Jesus is the Messiah. This cannot be understood that Jesus intended for the church to use this as a model for ministry.

Warren states that "Jesus often began evangelistic encounters with the question, What can I do for you?" Actually, Jesus is only recorded as saying this five times in all four gospels combined. Three of those are occurrences of Jesus healing blind Bartimaeus, and perhaps a companion (Matthew 20:29-34; Mark 10:46-51; Luke 18:35-43). In each of those passages, His question is a response to the blind men's request for mercy. In each passage the men twice acknowledge Jesus as the Son of David, the Messiah.

Therefore, we see that Jesus' question was not intended as a model for evangelism, but rather to reveal who He is. When Jesus asks that question in Mark 10:35-45, it is in response to the disciple's desire for status in the kingdom. Only in John 1:38 do we see something close to Warren's point. Jesus asked his future disciples, What do you seek? They then ask where He is staying and He responds, Come and see.

A close study of the four gospels makes it clear that when Jesus sensed that when the crowds were swarming around Him just to get their needs met, he left and preached elsewhere (Mark 1:35-39) Jesus did not view His purpose as meeting felt needs. His purpose in coming was to seek and save the lost by preaching the gospel (Mark 1:14-15)

The main glaring contradiction between the Purpose Driven Model and Jesus methods is He rebuked the crowds for coming to hear Him just because of felt needs while the Purpose Driven Model assumes that it does not matter why people come to Christ.

The Purpose Driven model claims that Jesus attracted the crowds by teaching in interesting and practical ways. (Matthew 7:28; Matthew 22:33; Mark 11:18; Mark 12:37) Warren uses these passages to show that the crowds are variously amazed or pleased by His teaching.

However, in every case the reactions were to the authority of Jesus' teaching rather than His style. (Matthew 7:29; Mark 11:15-17; Mark 12:37) In addition, Jesus never hesitated to offend His listeners if it meant clarifying the gospel. How many times did people threaten Him with stoning as a result? The Purpose Driven Model's method of preaching evangelistically by emphasizing only the benefits of knowing Jesus, or by appealing to their felt needs and tastes of unbelievers is not supportable nor can it be justified from sacred scripture.

The Purpose Driven model interprets 1 Corinthians 14:23 as a mandate for seeker sensitivity in worship. Therefore if the whole church assembles together and all speak in tongues, and ungifted men or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are mad? Warren's conclusion from this verse is, "God tells us to be sensitive to the hang-ups of unbelievers in our services. Being seeker sensitive in our worship is a biblical command. (p243)" This is blatant eisegesis. The context of 1 Corinthians 14 is the edification of the church (vv3,4,6,12,17,26), and specifically the superiority of prophecy over tongues in corporate worship (vv22,24,21) While Warren is correct to see an application for the way we treat unbelievers in church, Paul's primary solution to this circus is not accommodation or tongue interpretation, but rather prophecy. In other words preaching! The gospel will seem foolish to unbelievers no matter how it is presented (1 Corinthians 1:18; 2:14). It is the work of the Holy Spirit to make the connection in their hearts. We do not do it by seeker-sensitivity.

The Purpose Driven model cites 1 Corinthians 10:32 as proof of Paul's seeker sensitivity. Give no offense either to Jews or Greeks or to the Church of God (1 Corinthians 10:32) From p243, "Although Paul never uses the term seeker-sensitive', he definitely pioneered the idea. He was very concerned about not placing any stumbling blocks in front of unbelievers."

Once again, Warren takes a passage out of context and attempts to misuse it. This passage is not addressing how preachers should get the gospel across in corporate worship. Instead, it is all about how a Christian should live a cross-centered life to the glory of God. (v31) Paul wants believers to live seeker-sensitive lives. This has nothing to do with seeker-sensitive worship services.

The Purpose Drive model cites Luke 5:38 (new wineskins for new wine) as proof that new generations require new ministry methods (p121). [\(This same scripture was taken out of context and used exactly in this way recently, by David Slayton in a sermon earlier this year\)](#). Again, this passage is used by most seeker-sensitive models to prove their point. However, the context of this passage is for the people to have the proper reaction to the Messiah's physical presence, not the need for a new ministry methods in new generations (Luke 5:33-39). Jesus was making a point about the fact that He is the Messiah along with the implications of His incarnation. In other words, His presence called for feasting not fasting (v35).

These few examples show us that the Purpose Drive Model is a hermeneutic that often overlooks scriptural context. This results in a different interpretation of the text than the text makes itself.

### **Here are some methodological difficulties:**

Only the Gospel has driving power for the Church. Warren's primary claim is that churches need to be driven not by programs, tradition, or even by the seekers themselves, but by purpose (pp75-80). The Bible does not ascribe driving power to purposes. *"For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it."* (Isaiah 55:10-11 ESV)

This passage teaches not only that God's word succeeds or accomplishes God's purposes, but also that God Himself distinguishes between His word and His purposes. They cannot be equated. In the New Testament, we see that the driving power for the Church is only available in God's Word. For example, Paul is not ashamed of the gospel of Christ because it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes. (Romans 1:16; cf. 1 Corinthians 1:18; James 1:18, 21; 1 Peter 1:23-25) God's Word is what provides the driving power of His purposes. You must ask yourself whether your church needs to be a purpose driven church or a gospel driven church.

Method and Message are Biblically Inseparable. Warren encourages us not to confuse methods with the message. He says, "The message must never change, but methods must change with each new generation (pp61-62; see also p200)." However, as we saw above, God is committed to accomplishing His purposes by His Word. The implication is clear, the method and the message are inseparable. The message of the Gospel is His method (Isaiah 55:10-11; Romans 1:16). When a church buys into the concept of the method being a forever moving target generation after generation, it leads to a whatever works best mentality when it comes to deciding how to do things. Warren softens this burden with the following blessing, "You must figure out what works best to reach seekers in your local context (p248). I'm in favor of any method that reaches at least one person for Christ as long as it is ethical. We should never criticize any method that God is blessing (p156, cf. p62)." Those statements sound grand and very much in the vein of common sense. However, the measuring stick is that God is blessing. How do we measure that? How do we know if God is really blessing those methods?

Obviously, Warren (as Slayton does; noted in a sermon reviewed last year where he placed great emphasis on numbers in his SHRMP program) uses numbers. In his economy, numbers measure evangelistic and ministerial success.

*"At Saddleback, we identify the result we expect to see coming from fulfilling each of the five purposes of the church. For each result, we can ask*



*questions like: How many? How many more than last year? How many were brought to Christ? How many new members are there? How many are demonstrating spiritual maturity? ..How many have been equipped and mobilized for ministry? How many are fulfilling their life mission in the world? These questions measure our success and force us to evaluate if we are really fulfilling the Great Commandment and the Great Commission (pp107-108)." emphasis mine).*

We must ask ourselves if this would be a valid evaluation of whether the ministries at your church are successful or not. If numbers equate to success, then it makes sense that numbers function best to justify the method of ministry employed at our church. In the Purpose Driven Model that is exactly how they are used (pp178-179; 248).

Even though the model tells the pastor not to concentrate on numbers, but on purpose (p394), numerical growth is exactly what the seeker service is designed to promote.

Increasing the size of your church does not require the intelligence of a rocket scientist: you must simply get more people to visit!... What is the most natural way to increase the number of visitors to your church?... The answer is quite simple. By creating a service that Christians want to bring their unsaved friends to, you don't have to use contest, campaigns, or guilt to increase attendance. Members will invite their friends week after week, and your church will experience a steady influx of unchurched visitors (p253).

Think of Jeremiah and Ezekiel. If numerical growth was the key indicator of success in evangelism and ministry, what does this tell us about their effectiveness? Stephen was stoned to death for preaching the gospel (Acts 7). How successful was Stephen's ministry? If we compare his to Peter's who had three thousand converts in one day at Pentecost (Acts 2:41) things don't look so good. However, didn't Stephen cry that he saw Jesus standing at the right hand of the Father as he died? Think of Adoniram Judson, a faithful missionary who struggled for years to see the fruit from his ministry.

Think of John Bunyan. God allowed him to be imprisoned for over 12 years because he refused to stop preaching. In our zeal for converts don't we often forget about the function of the preached gospel as that which hardens disobedient men and women as they refuse to repent (2 Corinthians 2:15-16)? God's measure of His ministers is according to their faithfulness rather than numbers.

Building on Purpose leads to false unity. According to Iain Murray's *Evangelicalism Divided*, the number one contributing factor that led many evangelicals into false ecumenism with liberal churches in the last half of the twentieth century was their uniting around purpose before uniting around a biblical understanding of the gospel. Unfortunately, this changed the primary focus from the Gospel to the purpose of evangelism. The Gospel no longer regulated our participation in these purposes. The tragedy of this mistake was a complete lack of commitment to the Gospel. The liberal churches were not preaching the same gospel therefore the united effort didn't accomplish the same purpose.

Sadly, the Purpose Driven model's idea of building on unity of purpose rather than on unity in the gospel is repeating the same mistake. The result of this unity is something less than Christian. Your church should unite around the gospel before uniting around God's purposes because the gospel is what enables, regulates, and empowers our participation in God's purposes. It is very dangerous to get this reversed.

### **The Evangelistic Method of the Seeker-Sensitive Model:**

Those advocating the Purpose Driven Model claim that the gospel is primary, but they insist that its effectiveness is TOTALLY due to how it is packaged. What does that mean?

The following two points are from the vision statement of Saddleback Community Church. "It is the dream of a place where the hurting, the depressed, the frustrated, and the confused can find love, acceptance, help, hope, forgiveness, guidance, and encouragement. It is the dream of sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ with the hundreds of thousands of residents of south Orange County (p43)." Warren has five more dreams listed in the vision statement, but never defines what the gospel is, or that it requires repentance and belief. He read this vision statement at the trial run service before Saddleback got started. His aim was to try to paint, in attractive terms, the picture as clearly as I saw it (p42 emphasis mine) When he mailed out his promotional letter to unbelievers announcing his first service, he surveyed the community for their perception of their own needs, and their major complaints about churches. The answers he got back were as follows: The messages are irrelevant, the members are unfriendly, the church just wants my money, and child care should be better (pp192-193).

What was his response? In the promotional letter, he announced, "At

Saddleback Valley Community Church you

Meet new friends and get to know your neighbors

Enjoy upbeat music with a contemporary flavor

Hear positive, practical messages which encourage you each week

Trust your children to the care of dedicated nursery workers (p194)"

Why did he do it this way? Warren claims that he was simply using the upbeat approach that [Jesus] message offered practical benefits to those who listened to Him. His truth would set people free' and bring all sorts of blessings to their lives (p224). Is this what Jesus taught? Didn't He call His disciples to take up their cross and follow Him in salvation and discipleship. Jesus preached the necessity of repentance and belief right at the outset of His ministry (Mark 1:14-15). What did He tell the rich young ruler to do first? He was directed to part with his possessions (Matthew 19:16-26) because they were an idol separating him from belief. Jesus preached a costly grace that was cross-centered (Matthew 16:24; Mark 8:34-38; Mark 10:17-27), not a gospel of health, wealth and prosperity. However, Warren says, Crowds always flock to hear good news.

There is enough bad news in the world that the last thing people need is to hear more bad news when they come to church. They are looking for anyone who can give them hope and help and encouragement. A good salesman knows you always start with customer's needs, not the product (p225; cf. Also p271)

We should be uncomfortable with the concept of integrating sales techniques and positive thinking with the Gospel to make it effective. Is this how the Apostles shared the Gospel? They regularly accused the unbelieving Jews of crucifying Jesus (Acts 2:37; 3:13, 26; 4:2, 10; 5:29-30; 7:52). What was the result? Peter was imprisoned (Acts 4:1-3) and Stephen was stoned (Acts 7:54-60). Did this kill the spread of the Gospel?

But the Word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem (Acts 6:7; cf. 13:24; 19:20) Nothing has changed in Jesus' command to make disciples from all nations. Christians are called to simply and clearly preach the gospel, calling people to genuine repentance from their sins and belief in Christ for forgiveness.

The Purpose Driven Model packages the gospel according to audience analysis because Warren has determined that that is the key to its effectiveness. He states, "Anybody can be won to Christ if you discover the key to his or her heart (p220). The preacher must constantly be on guard to never preach the gospel in a way that may offend." ([This is why Slayton's sermons are so simplistic and watered down.](#)) So, Warren states, "We like to use passages that don't require any previous understanding. We also like to use passages that show the benefits of knowing Christ" (p298). Think carefully about this way of doing evangelism. Are there implications? You bet there is!

It obscures the gospel. The gospel is a blend of benefits and costs. The PDC model emphasizes the former and ignores the latter. However, true gospel

preaching must include God's demand for repentance (Mark 1:14-15). Even churches outside of the PDC model have experienced the shipwreck of telling people to come to Jesus so He can make your life better without telling them of the cost. We end up with people who take the bait, but who refuse to repent when they learn later that biblical Christianity actually requires a lifetime of continual repentance from sin.

It leads to false assurance. No one is saved outside of repentance and belief. Telling people who are simply religious converts that they are truly saved is deception. They are most likely still in their sins. This is tragic.

It misunderstands man's ability and God's sovereignty in conversion. Warren's statement from p220 that anybody can be won to Christ if you discover the key to his or her heart ignores both the inability of the natural man to understand the gospel of grace, and the sovereignty of God in dispensing His saving Grace. Only the Holy Spirit can change men's and women's and children's hearts to see the truth, repent and believe (1 Corinthians 1:18; 2:14). The Father is sovereign in giving to the Son those whom He intends to save (John 8:43-47; 10:26-29). Warren's statement is biblically inconsistent and utterly false. This method depends upon manipulation to convert people.

It builds a worldly perspective. Warren states, "We must learn to think like unbelievers in order to win them (p189; see also p186)". However, he does acknowledge that baby believers don't know what they need (p311). That being true, how much less, then, do unbelievers know what they need? Therefore, building an entire evangelistic method on suiting the tastes and meeting the needs of unbelievers is utter foolishness.

However, this is the very foundation of the seeker-sensitive service. Once you know your target, [\(for Slayton, it is primarily minority youth\)](#) it will determine many of the components of your seeker service: music style, message topics, testimonies, creative arts, and more (pp253-254).

When Paul stated that he became all things to all people in 1 Corinthians 9:19-24 (p197), he did not mean that he was willing to think like an unbeliever (p189) in order to make the gospel attractive to unregenerate minds (1 Corinthians 2:14). He meant that he was willing to give up his freedom from Jewish ceremonial law in order to win Jews to Christ, and that he was willing to use that freedom when with Gentiles in order to win them to Christ.

It tries to make the gospel appear attractive on the world's terms. (This is why Slayton got rid of the last Music Director, stopped using hymns, moved the organ console out, and encouraged charismatic hand-raising with the emotional impact of a praise band and singers.) The Purpose Driven evangelistic method is built on the perceived need to exegete the community. Warren wrote, "I must pay as much attention to the geography, customs, culture, and religious background of my community as I do those who lived in Bible times if I am to faithfully communicate God's Word (p160)." Yes, if the gospel and its requirements are not to be misunderstood by hearers, then it must be clarified where it contradicts culture, and where culture has made it hard to understand the implications of the gospel in everyday lives. However, this is not what Warren means. Warren's purpose in cultural exegesis is to make the gospel appear attractive on the world's terms, as we saw above. Think carefully through this!

It is impossible to make the exclusive cross of Jesus Christ attractive and appealing to a religiously pluralistic, morally relativistic culture by structuring our approach according to their preferences. Unbelieving Americans do not believe in absolute truth, or universally binding morality, or that exclusive claims of truth in religion can even be made. They also do not believe in sin. The genuine Gospel contradicts all of this. Once adulteration of the Gospel takes place in an attempt to make it culturally relevant serious damage has been done to its eternal effectiveness.

**Worldly Necessities:**

The Purpose Drive model states the necessity of worldly elements for effective evangelism. ([This why Slayton endorses secular dancing, Hip-Hop, and Rap Music in the church and allows young people to go from the church to see this type of 'music.'](#)). It makes secondary things primary such as multiple services and programs (pp200-201), the arrangement of chairs (p266), to sanitized nurseries (p268), to the building itself (p269), Warren insists that churches won't grow if these things aren't in place. In America, it takes parking to reach people. If you don't have a place for their car, you don't have a place for them (p254). Come on! These things are nice, but they are not primary.

Conversion and the Seeker Sensitive Service. The Purpose Driven Model raises problems for the doctrine and experience of Christian conversion. Making a service comfortable for the unchurched doesn't mean changing your theology, it means changing the environment of the service (p244). Unbelievers have a much deeper need than feeling comfortable. In fact they need to feel UNCOMFORTABLE in their sins in order to repent and believe the gospel. Repentance is always a battle. Comfort is precisely what must be overcome. If this is overlooked then it must lead to a change in our theology.

I have always had a problem with people who are against things changing, but offer no solution to the obvious problem the changes were meant to address. Therefore, please let me make a suggestion that, hopefully, would help your church be exactly what God wills for it to be.