

The Purpose Driven Church (a critique)

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It's a depressing statistic. A majority of Western churches do not see a single addition through conversion in a typical year. So to try and turn things round many are rejecting traditional methods of evangelism and adopting a new 'church growth' model. Market research has convinced them that unbelievers stay away from church not because they reject Christ, but because they reject the church's boring presentation of Christ. There's no need to change the product – just the packaging – and the crowds will come flocking back.

The new packaging is all about *replacement*. A 'stage' with a moveable Perspex lectern replaces the old wooden pulpit. PowerPoint graphics replace the hymn books. A rock band replaces the organ. A casually dressed and jovial audience replaces the reverent congregation. A charming minister in a t-shirt and jeans replaces the suited 'preacher'. Fun replaces holiness as the tone of the service. Loud music, side-splitting drama, multimedia presentations and a humorous 'talk' replace hymn singing and preaching. But, we're confidently assured, the message remains the same.

Judging by numbers alone the new model has certainly proved a success. Prominent 'church growth' pastors like Robert Schuller (Crystal Cathedral, LA), Rick Warren (*Saddleback Church*, California), Bill Hybels (*Willow Creek Church*, Chicago) and Joel Osteen (*Lakewood Church*, Houston) attract thousands to their churches each Sunday. Though a majority of this 'growth' occurs by transfer rather than 'conversion', multitudes of other churches have adopted this model and have seen their congregations rocket numerically. Small wonder anyone questioning the movement is told, "*Never criticise what God is blessing.*"¹ Truth never stood a chance against success.

How widespread is this new phenomenon? Consider this fact; over 400,000 pastors from 162 countries have been trained under Rick Warren's church growth seminar material alone. (Warren calls his philosophy a "*stealth movement flying beneath the radar that's changing literally thousands of churches around the world*"). His book *The Purpose Driven Church*, which espouses this new philosophy, has sold over 1 million copies in 20 languages and is a standard textbook in hundreds of Bible Colleges. Yet despite the incredible popularity of Rick Warren and others like him, there are numerous problems with the church growth movement, starting with its history.

Problem 1 — The Origin and History of the Movement

The father of the church growth movement was the relatively unknown missionary Donald McGavran, whose writings had a 'dramatic impact' on Rick Warren. The day in 1974 when Warren first read an article on church growth by

McGavran was the day he decided to "*invest the rest of his life*" discovering the principles of 'church growth'. McGavran's best known student and successor at the *Fuller School of World Mission* in California was C. Peter Wagner, a founding member of the *Lausanne Committee on World Evangelization*. Wagner, a close friend of the late John Wimber (Vineyard), calls himself an apostle and is one of the world's leading promoters of charismatic 'signs and wonders'. From *Fuller Seminary* the church growth philosophy spread worldwide.

The first pastor to 'make it big' using modern church growth techniques was Robert Schuller. "*An indisputed fact is that I am the founder, really, of the church-growth movement in this country...I advocated and launched what has become known as the marketing approach in Christianity.*"² How did he do it? "*The secret of winning unchurched people into the church is really quite simple. Find out what would impress the nonchurched in your community [then give it to them].*"² Yet Schuller is a false teacher of huge proportions. An unashamed universalist, he rejects Jesus as the only way to heaven. He states that making people aware of their lost and sinful condition is the very worst thing a preacher can do. As for the new birth, to Schuller it simply means changing from a negative to a positive self-image.

Schuller's landmark 1975 book *Your Church Has Real Possibilities* impressed Warren and Hybels who both visited Schuller to learn more. Hybels called his first meeting with Schuller a "*divine encounter.*"³ Kay Warren, Rick's wife, said that Schuller had a "*profound influence*" on Rick, who was "*captivated by his positive appeal to unbelievers.*"⁴ Warren has since shared the platform at several of Schuller's leadership conferences and an endorsement by Schuller appears at the beginning of Warren's book *The Purpose Driven Church*: "*I'm praying that every pastor will read this book...Rick Warren is the one all of us should listen to and learn from.*" Today Warren, Hybels and Schuller all operate their churches on the same market-driven principles.

Problem 2 — The Business-Church Marriage

The second major problem with the church growth movement is its love-affair with the business world. Warren, who partners with marketing agencies like *CMS* in Covina, California, a company that helps giants like *Isuzu Motors* and *Quaker Oats* "*grow their businesses,*"⁵ follows the advice of secular business guru Peter Drucker, with whom he has engaged in a bi-annual consultation for 20 years. The focus of Drucker's recent consulting has been to teach churches and charities to behave more like corporations and Warren has adapted many of his ideas.⁶ For instance, the *Drucker Foundation* has a 'Self-Assessment Tool' for business leaders. Warren has a 'Health Assessment Tool' for readers of his *Purpose Driven Life*. Anyone familiar with the ideas promoted in business books will easily spot their cloned 'Christian' versions all through Warren's writings. *Forbes* Magazine publisher, Rich Karlgaard said of *The Purpose Driven Church*, "*This is one of the greatest entrepreneurial books I've ever read, and if you merely*

*substitute the word 'business' for 'church', it's just a terrific guide that can be taken to a secular and business audience."*⁷ Bob Buford, founder of the *Leadership Network* in Dallas, Texas, has spent over 20 years integrating Drucker's business ideas into churches. Another friend of Warren and Hybels, Buford calls himself "*the legs for his [Drucker's] brain.*"⁸

Compare all of this to Paul's pivotal message to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20. He mentions nothing about marketing, growing or adapting. Instead he warns them to teach the whole counsel of God, to beware of false teachers and to preach the gospel of faith and *repentance* - which introduces the third major problem in the church growth movement, the corruption of the gospel message.

Problem 3 — The Dumbing Down of the Message

Church growth advocate Lee Strobel recommends reaching 'un-churched Harry and Mary' by starting with their 'felt needs'. (Rather than with righteousness, self-control and judgment to come as Paul did with Felix in Acts 24). Thus "*If you discover that unchurched Harry suffers from a sagging self-esteem...you can tell him how your own self-esteem has soared ever since you learned how much you matter to God.*"⁹ Or if he's a thrill seeker tell him there's "*nothing more exciting, more challenging and more adventure packed than living as a devoted follower of Jesus Christ.*"¹⁰ In other words, discover what a sinner wants out of life and give it to him 'in Jesus'. In a chapter in *The Purpose Driven Church* entitled 'How Jesus Attracted Crowds', Rick Warren states: "*The most likely place to start is with the person's felt needs...this was the approach Jesus used...A good salesman knows you always start with the customer's needs, not the product.*"¹¹ In the previous chapter Warren claims, "*Whenever Jesus encountered a person he'd begin with their hurts, needs, and interests.*"¹² Yet simply noting how the Lord dealt with Nicodemus, the rich young ruler, the Syrophenician woman and Levi, to name but a few, shows Warren's selective exegesis to be very misleading.

Christians have always known that when witnessing to different types of individuals from diverse backgrounds it is useful to understand the presuppositions they bring to the table and adjust one's approach accordingly. Clearly the Lord dealt with Nicodemus differently than with the woman at the well. Again, Paul addressed the Jews in Acts 13 differently to the Greeks on Mars Hill in Acts 17. So why all the fuss about Warren? Because Warren is not simply recommending that preachers bear their audience's background in mind; he is advocating a total change in the *technique, style and form of historical evangelical preaching*, and he'll even twist scripture to make his point. He favours a rendering of Col 4:5-6 which reads: "*Be tactful to those who are not Christians...Talk to them agreeably and with a flavour of wit, and try to fit your answers to the needs of each one.*"¹³ Yet the context of this passage is not about public preaching and the translation Warren favours is not in the least bit accurate to the original Greek text.

While no pastor would ever admit to watering down the gospel message, that is exactly what has resulted from preaching *positive* needs-orientated sermons that entertain and amuse. For instance, an evaluation of Hybels' preaching reveals that in a typical month three out of four weekend messages are about God's love. A mere 7% of messages *mention* God's holiness. The truth of God's wrath against mankind's sin is virtually never heard.¹⁴ What isn't preached is more revealing than what is.

Concluding their weak gospel presentations, many church growth preachers lead their audience in a model 'sinner's prayer'. Warren advises sinners 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...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."¹⁵ No conviction of sin, no repentance, no forsaking of the sinner's way, no counting the cost – just 'accept and receive' and the job's done. Do these false teachers actually understand the true need of the sinner? Clearly not, for sinful man's first and greatest need is repentance (not self-esteem as Schuller teaches). Man needs salvation from sin, deliverance from wrath and cleansing from guilt. The 'consumer' is actually a rebellious unclean sinner who, far from being 'always right', is always wrong. He doesn't feel his need for the 'product' because he is spiritually dead. He only *thinks* he loves God and wants a relationship with Jesus, but actually he knows nothing about his true sinfulness and God's righteousness.

The true gospel is not about making people feel better about themselves, but about making people realise they are lost, guilty and perishing. It does not attempt to bring people to Christ to meet their felt needs - rather it proclaims forgiveness and justification to meet their *real need* if they will repent and trust alone in Christ. A product that exposes sin, condemns pride and strips away self-righteousness can never be 'marketed'. It is foolishness to the lost (1 Cor 1:18). Yet the new gospel is being presented as an attractive item to the sinner because it liberates his self esteem, fills his emptiness, gives him an exciting life, meets his needs and heals his hurts.

In the false gospel of the church growth movement the sinner is told that Christ died for him because he is so valuable to God. But this is a denial of grace. There is nothing in us to merit God's love. Again, the idea that the sinner is friendly towards God but just turned off by the church is a denial of human depravity. Man is an enemy of God, alienated in his mind by wicked works (Col 1:21). Yet the false gospel says, "*You may not believe in God, but God believes in you and you need to believe in yourself.*" (The Bible says that Jesus did not believe in His hearers, John 2:24).

Problem 4 — Employing a Worldly Approach

The fourth problem with the 'purpose driven church' is its creation of a worldly ethos within the four walls of 'the sanctuary' in order to make the church more appealing to the world. Apparently since unchurched Harry has to dress smartly at the office all week, he insists on the casual look at weekends. To make him feel comfortable *the saints* must remove their respectful Sunday best and go for the casual or even the scruffy look. Then there's the 'music problem'. Unchurched Harry hates organs and choirs. A cappella singing makes him cringe. So, the music *must* be contemporary and loud. According to Warren, Saddleback exploded with growth after loud rock music made its entrance. People want to feel the music not just hear it.

Herding all the flock together three times a week for nothing more than hymn singing and Bible teaching doesn't work anymore. Ministries, programmes and small groups must be introduced to meet people's needs for counselling about poor self esteem, depression, infertility, singleness, weight loss, co-dependency, addictions and more.

According to Warren, providing the primary issues are in focus (Christ and His gospel) the secondary issues (the church model/methods) can be as varied as you like. What works (pragmatism) is all that matters. "*I contend that when a church continues to use methods that no longer work, it is being unfaithful to Christ.*"¹⁶ So just as Jesus 'targeted' the lost sheep of the house of Israel, Paul targeted the Gentiles and Peter targeted the Jews,¹⁷ at Saddleback Warren uses multiple venues to 'target' different markets. A jazz service for jazz lovers. A rock-n-roll service for rockers. Based on a mistranslation of Acts 5:42, Warren claims he's following the apostles who provided different kinds of services in separate 'courts' of the temple.

Warren even claims that God enjoys rock music.¹⁸ "*I reject the idea that music styles can be judged as either 'good' or 'bad'...no particular style of music is 'sacred'...There is no such thing as 'Christian music', only Christian lyrics.*"¹⁹ Yet just as clearly as a march tune fits a military scene, jazz fits a night club scene and rock fits a festival scene, so there is a certain kind of sound that suits a prayer meeting - and it's not the rock, rap and jazz sound that the purpose driven church has borrowed from the world. Music that has a corrupt origin, employs sensual rhythms and is accompanied by a fleshly breathy style of singing, with singers who scoop and slide from one note to another, is utterly unsuitable for the spiritual praise of God (Eph 5:19).²⁰

Conclusion

At the root of the entire purpose driven church paradigm is a fatal misconception. As John MacArthur points out: "*The notion that church meetings should be used to tantalize or attract non-Christians is a relatively recent development. Nothing like it is found in scripture; in fact, the apostle Paul spoke of unbelievers entering*

*the assembly as an exceptional event (1 Cor 14:23).*²¹ In fact, the church at Jerusalem was so holy and God-fearing that nobody *dared* to join it (Acts 5:11). The New Testament preaching of Paul *“kept back nothing”* (Acts 20:20) and involved reproving, rebuking and exhorting with patience and doctrine, bearing in mind a future time when people would no longer *“endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers and they will turn their ears away from the truth”* (2 Tim 4:2-4). That day has surely come.

The first few decades of the church growth movement have clearly shown the naiveté of those who thought that the true gospel could survive the introduction of a marketing philosophy which says the customer is king. Does style affect substance? It actually does much more. The purpose driven style has completely subverted the true gospel message. Exposition has surrendered to entertainment, preaching to performances, doctrine to drama and theology to theatrics – and the fallout has been catastrophic.

Doctrine has been trivialised and expositional preaching abandoned, leading to the introduction of multitudes of false converts and shallow members. A former *Willow Creek* counsellor admitted *“Willow Creek is a mile wide and one-half inch deep.”*²² Those who grieve to see their churches adopt this model have been marginalized. Separation from sin, worldliness, false doctrine and false churches has been deeply compromised. Speaking of his church members an unconcerned Warren states, *“Are there unrepentant pagans mixed into Saddleback’s crowd of 10,000? Without a doubt...That’s okay. Jesus said...Don’t worry about the tares...”*²³ When George Barna surveyed *Willow Creek’s* weekend participants he found that while 91% stated that their highest value was having a deep personal relationship with God, of this same group 25% of singles, 38% of single parents and 41% of divorced individuals *“admitted to having illicit sexual relationships in the last 6 months.”*²⁴

The answer to this movement is to abandon it altogether and return to biblical truth, biblical living, biblical preaching and biblical church principles. The idea that these new ‘purpose driven’ methods will restore the power of God in our midst is a red herring. Warren might just as well say that if only instead of being a preacher of righteousness (2 Pet 2:5) Noah had done some simple market research and built a ‘purpose driven ark’, more than eight people would have come aboard. When holy living, Spirit empowered preaching, loving unity and faithfulness to truth doesn’t seem to bring ‘results’, turning to the new methods advocated by Warren will only spell disaster. There will be results – but all of the wrong kind. A generation ago A.W. Tozer wisely said, *“One of the most popular current errors, and the one out of which springs most of the noisy, blustering religious activity in evangelical circles, is the notion that as times change the church must change with them.”* Since faithfulness to God’s word, as opposed to what evangelicalism calls success, will be the standard of reward at the judgment seat of Christ (1 Cor 4:4-5), obedience to the command to preach and teach,

without trimming our sail to the wind of the world, is the most pressing need of the hour.

Notes:

1. Rick Warren, *Purpose Driven Church*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), p. 62
2. G.A. Pritchard, *Willow Creek Seeker Services*, (Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI, 1996), p. 51
3. Lynne & Bill Hybels, *Rediscovering Church*, (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 1995), p. 69
4. Tim Stafford, A Regular Purpose Driven Guy, *Christianity Today*, 18.11.02, Vol 46, No. 12, p. 4
5. www.christian-ministry.com/aboutus_who.htm
6. Forbes Magazine, April 5, 2004, p.110
7. CBS News, Early Show, 22 Mar 2005 www.cbsnews.com
8. Jack Beatty, *The World According to Peter Drucker* (New York: The Free Press, 1998), p. 186
9. Lee Strobel, *Inside The Mind of Unchurched Harry & Mary*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1993), p. 92
10. Ibid. p. 124
11. Rick Warren, *Purpose Driven Church*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), p. 219 & 225
12. Ibid. p. 197
13. Ibid. p. 293
14. G.A. Pritchard, *Willow Creek Seeker Services*, (Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI, 1996), p. 263-264
15. Rick Warren, *Purpose Driven Life*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), p. 58-59
16. Rick Warren, *Purpose Driven Church*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), p. 65
17. Ibid. p. 158
18. Ibid p. 240
19. Ibid p. 281
20. For further info read K. Smith's book, *Music and Morals*, (Enumclaw, WA: Winepress Publishing, 2005)
21. John MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway), p. 83.
22. G.A. Pritchard, *Willow Creek Seeker Services*, (Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI, 1996), p. 268
23. Rick Warren, *Purpose Driven Church*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), p. 237
24. G.A. Pritchard, *Willow Creek Seeker Services*, (Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI, 1996), p. 236