



My Visit to Ask Rick Warren to Preach Christ

By Bob DeWaay

In May, one of the pastors at Saddleback Church invited me to attend a Purpose Driven conference—at Saddleback’s expense. Their only caveat was that I say nothing until the end, at which time I would be able to comment about why I disagree with the Purpose Driven movement. I declined on the grounds that I had already studied the movement and had no need to hear more from its proponents. When I saw the lineup of speakers I realized that it would have been exasperating to listen for hours to what I have already rejected. Rick Warren’s chief of staff e-mailed back and offered to have me come only on Thursday in order to talk to Warren in person. Since the Bible says that we should be ready to give a reason for our hope in the gospel (1Peter 3:15) I decided to go.

I arrived in time on Thursday to hear the last hour and a half of the conference, which featured Warren promoting his PEACE plan. It was typical of many other Warren speeches I have listened to. He spoke about meeting with world leaders and how he plans to help them solve problems in their countries. He gave reasons why 1 billion Christians are the best hope of solving the world’s biggest problems. What was lacking was any commitment to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ clearly to all people. That was exactly what I planned to urge Warren to do when I met him. Listening to his speech only reinforced that commitment.

After the speech (and some seriously loud, ear-splitting music) I was able to meet up with fellow Warren critic, Mr. Chris Rosebrough, who had attended each day of the conference. We waited for about an hour while Warren held a press conference—he eventually appeared for our meeting with about a half dozen others.

At the beginning of our meeting Warren asked us to share our “stories” with him. Both of us had come out of bad doctrine and faulty movements to become gospel centric. I shared my experience of learning church growth theory at seminary and showed him a first edition copy of his book *The Purpose Driven Church* that was required reading for me in 1996. I also shared how discouraging it was to study church growth teaching when our inner city church was shrinking at the time. I shared how I found hope and inspiration

from John MacArthur and that I chose his ministry model rather than church growth theory.

After sharing our stories I made the main point I had hoped to make, which was an appeal to preach Christ. To make sure he understood what I meant, I shared the gospel itself according to the four points I use in my own sermons: 1) Who Christ is; 2) What Christ did; 3) Why we need Him; and 4) What He expects of us. I filled in the details as follows: Jesus Christ existed *as* God and *with* God from all eternity. He was born of a virgin and lived a sinless life. He performed many miracles to prove He indeed was the promised Messiah. He predicted His own resurrection from the dead and was indeed raised. That makes Him unique and unlike any other religious leader. It proved His claims. I then proceeded to share that He died for sins, shedding His blood on the cross to avert God's wrath against sin for those who believe. He bodily ascended into heaven and will return to judge the wicked world. What He expects of us is to repent and believe the gospel. To repent means to turn away from sin, self, religion, the world—and anything else we have been trusting—and to put our trust only in Christ.

Pastor Warren responded neither positively or negatively to that but specifically asked us why we were opposing him. Our answer was that we did not hear him publicly preach Christ in a forthright manner. Chris shared his experience of listening to the Purpose Driven message Warren himself taught and hearing lots of material that challenged him to do more and do better—but not hearing about the forgiveness of sins. In that regard Chris specifically mentioned the lectures at the Saddleback summit he had just attended. I thought he made a very good point that also pointed to the need for gospel preaching.

The second point I made was the need to adhere to *sola scriptura* (Scripture alone). I specifically told him that his *Purpose Driven Life* was an amalgam of scripture and human wisdom gleaned from general revelation and that the body of work is presented as a seamless whole to his readers regarding what God expects of them. I gave as an illustration his exposition of Romans 8:28, one passage he correctly interprets and applies. I said, therefore, what he said about Romans 8:28 is binding because it came from what God said in the Bible. But the problem is that everything else is presented in the same manner, like “keeping a journal.” I told him that God has not commanded us to

keep a journal, so we can safely ignore that. But his readers are given the impression that everything he says in the book is what God wants them to do.

I also pointed out the serious problem with “confused universal application.” I explained to Warren that he takes Bible passages that apply only to Christians and applies them to everyone in general. That creates confusion and possible false assurance. His reply was that the book was originally intended only for the congregation at Saddleback so it was written to Christians. We did not take up a debate on that point, wanting to stay on the issues of preaching Christ and *sola scriptura*, but I think that claim is questionable in light of other things I have heard him say about how the book came to be. Besides, there are statements in the book early on addressed to non-Christians.

I gave him copies of my book and the Purpose Driven discernment tool, which we publish on our Web site.[\[i\]](#) He took both. So he has in his possession detailed arguments against his Purpose Driven movement.

The final point that I made concerned building a ministry on general revelation (what can be observed in nature as opposed to specific revelation, which is only found in Scripture). I said, “You cannot have a new reformation grounded in general revelation.” His response was, “But Jesus told us to do good works.” My response back was that Christians doing good works do not appear any different than people of other religions doing good works. I then said that the only two things the church has to offer that people cannot get anywhere else are salvation and sanctification. Neither of those can be gained through general revelation.

I did not get a chance to go into more detail on that point because that was the end of our meeting. But it is a very important point. For example, SHAPE, and PEACE are grounded primarily in general revelation. General revelation can help a person solve problems, but it cannot make him holy in the sight of a holy God! Better living in this life while facing God’s wrath in eternity is not what Christianity is about. We must preach the gospel first; changed lives are then the result of God’s work of grace, not the use of human wisdom.

One of the disconcerting things about dealing with Rick Warren is that in spite of many problematic, public teachings, he claims to agree with orthodox Christian doctrine. His church Web site does have an essentially orthodox statement of faith.[\[ii\]](#) When I

researched for my book *Redefining Christianity*, I found that the deeper I dug into the movement, the more conservative it appeared. Warren and Purpose Driven appear liberal in public (at least to us critics) and conservative in private. I describe this phenomenon as “file cabinet orthodoxy” in chapter 8 of my book.[\[iii\]](#) In our private meeting he again asserted that he believes orthodox theology. He said, “I am not a hyper-Calvinist, I am a Kuyper-Calvinist.” (Abraham Kuyper was a Reformed theologian from the Netherlands.)

Some people have questioned the wisdom of speaking with Warren and feared that I would be subjected to a “dialogue” that would lead to “consensus” after the manner of the Hegelian synthesis. Nothing like that happened. Warren mostly listened to what we had to say and did not attempt to recruit us for his movement. The one point he would not listen to was when I brought up the damage that is being done to churches and Christians by pastors who have joined the Purpose Driven movement. He claimed that he is no more responsible for what is done in the name of Purpose Driven than Luther is for what is done in his name, or Calvin for what is done in his name. I do not agree with the analogy because, as I show in chapter 3 of my book, Purpose Driven sells material that influences pastors to remove “resisters.” But wanting to keep on the topic of gospel preaching and sola scriptura, I did not argue the point until the meeting with his chief of staff, which happened after the meeting with Warren. There, we had more of a debate and I was able to share a horror story about what happens in the name of Purpose Driven.

There was no rancor or animosity from either side during the meeting. Warren is in person as he is in public, which is warm and accessible. Our problem is not with his personal demeanor, but with his ministry philosophy which pushes gospel preaching and Bible teaching out of churches. Purpose Driven is about making a version of Christianity that is inoffensive to the world and thus attractive to people so they attend church. But the gospel is offensive to Jews and foolishness to Greeks (1Corinthians 1:23). However, it is God’s means of salvation. We were able to urge Rick Warren to start preaching it. He did not say whether he would or would not. I expected him to say that he is already preaching Christ but he did not make that response to us.

Anyone will be able to see if he does start preaching Christ; they merely need to listen to his public speeches before mixed audiences. If he does not, then nothing has

changed. I stand by the analysis of Purpose Driven as explained in my book and other writings.

[i] Available here: <http://cicministry.org/> It is free.

[ii] <http://saddleback.com/flash/believe2.html>

[iii] *Redefining Christianity – Understanding the Purpose Driven Movement*, (21st Century Press: Springfield, MO, 2006) 164. Available here: <http://www.cicstore.org/servlet/the-1/Redefining-Christianity--dsh--Understanding/Detail>

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