

A Review of “The Purpose Driven Life”

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Rick Warren is Pastor of Saddleback Church, a Southern Baptist congregation in California. His book, *The Purpose Driven Life* (hereafter PDL) has sold 11 million copies the first year in print. Congregations of varying confessions have endorsed this book, including many in the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, several in our own backyard.

PDL is divided into 40 days of reading, and 5 purposes:

- You Were Planned for God’s Pleasure,
- You Were Formed for God’s Family,
- You Were Created to Become Like Christ,
- You Were Shaped for Serving God,
- You Were Made for a Mission.

Mr. Warren is quoted in an interview with *Modern Reformation* as stating, “this book is about the Christian’s walk, not justification.”¹ It is my premise from having read the book that both his theology of the Christian walk (Sanctification) as well as Justification fail the test of Holy Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions. The quotations below I use to support my premise.

There are some good things in this book. Chapters 25 and 26 are fairly well – written chapters on the strength found in weakness and suffering in the Christian life, and how temptation works. However, on a whole, the majority of the book reveals nothing new here – a theology of glory, confusion of law and gospel, denial of the incarnation of Christ and his presence in his Church to give gifts to men, anti – sacraments and anti – Divine monergism in conversion and sanctification, a confusion of the priesthood and the Holy Ministry (see Chapters 30 – 32; also Chapter 36) as to their sphere of responsibility. Essentially Mr. Warren takes us back to prior the Reformation and comes in Rome’s back door.

Warning signs are evident from the very beginning of the book that sanctification in Mr Warren’s theology is not allowed to be informed by Christ’s continuing work on our behalf after justification. In Chapter 1, Mr. Warren states, “It all starts with God”, “it is not about you” (p. 17). It becomes clear as the book progresses that it also is not about Jesus Christ, the incarnate God/man in the flesh to this very day for us, but indeed about all that we do. His book fails it’s purpose. “You must begin with your creator”. “You exist because God wills that you exist” (p. 18). This is all true, but Mr Warren’s starting point, the sovereign, majesty of God is classic Calvinism, and should strike fear into our hearts. In the *Modern Reformation* interview¹, when asked to give a definition of the PDL, he responds with the Westminster Shorter Catechism answer, “man’s chief end is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever”.

In Calvin's theology people are saved in order to honor God. Lutheran theology we are saved and loved by God on account of what Christ has done for us. Christ has pleased God, and pleased Him alone. We please God because God is pleased with Christ. Calvinism believes God redeems not for the sake of the sinner but for Himself. It is a motivation out of the Divine sovereignty of God, not Christ in the flesh for us, as Lutherans, Holy Scripture, and the Confessions teach. No longer Christ for us (in both our salvation and our life on earth), but us for Christ. Saved to Obey. This is the theology of PDL.

Mr. Warren states, “You were saved to serve God” (p. 228). This is a much different answer than the one given by the Small Catechism of Martin Luther:

The Second Article: Redemption

And in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the

Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Plate, was crucified, died and was buried. He descended into hell. The third day He rose again from the dead. He ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God, the Father Almighty. From thence He will come to judge the living and the dead.

What does this mean?

I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary, is my Lord. Who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil; not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death, that I may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as He is risen from the dead, lives and reigns to all eternity. This is most certainly true.²

Consider the Rev. David Scaer's comments in his article, "Sanctification in Lutheran Theology"³

"Luther's famous "for us," so central in his Christology, is ultimately replaced by Calvin by "for God." The real goal is not reinstitution of fallen mankind for its own sake, but for the praise of God. Since the sovereignty of God is the final goal of all of His acts, including redemption, the works have value, not because of their Christological association as in Lutheran theology, but because they are in themselves pleasing to God. In fact, the works have a higher value than the persons performing them. It is a matter of what God can get out of man for Himself. Thus, prayer is particularly important for Calvin since God is glorified by the praises of believers.³⁶ For Luther prayer is the Christian's recognition of his faith's own helplessness and by prayer he throws himself upon the mercy of God.³⁷ Consider the phrase "saved to serve." It is proper if it refers to the result of God's redemptive work. If it is understood as His purpose, then this is Calvin's view."

Lutheran theology has always emphasized the "Christ for us", the God/man in the flesh is how we come to know and have any relationship with God, before or after our justification. His incarnation, His coming to earth, and His continued coming to us in His preaching, baptism, and the Lord's Supper is not just for our justification, but for our sanctification, or Christian life as well. Christ is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end (and the middle!) in our lives. Mr. Warren's first chapter and the chapters that follow asks us to focus up in the heavens to God's sovereign will instead of Christ for us, as revealed to us in Holy Scripture, as revealed in the flesh. We are then left with terror of God's glory apart from Christ, or the deadly understanding that I can indeed keep the law given throughout the book. Christ's work is clearly absent for the sinner.

You cannot talk about a merciful God without talking about Christ. Everything we need to know is revealed in the person of the Son, for our justification and our Christian life. Those that have the Son have the Father.

Mr Warren indicates the 5 most common things that drives one's life:

- Many people are driven by guilt (p. 27),
- Many people are driven by resentment and anger (p. 28),
- Many people are driven by fear (p. 28),
- Many people are driven by materialism (p. 29),
- Many people are driven by need for approval (p. 29),

The interesting thing throughout the book is that it is not clear that even Christians continue to have a sinful nature. The Simul Justus et Peccator, at the same time Saint and Sinner, biblical (Romans 7) understanding of the Christian between Christ's comings/advents is not recognized in Mr. Warren's theology. Instead Mr. Warren sees the Christian life as progressive; first justification, then sanctification. Justification no longer plays any meaningful part in the life of the Christian. It is all about our purpose, our fulfilling, our obeying God. I find it very difficult in a Romans 7 context to agree with Mr. Warren's

statement, “The greatest tragedy is not death, but life without purpose” (p 30). What Mr. Warren doesn’t understand is that the Christian in this life is never not 100% sinner and 100% saint. This is why Christians suffer (sometimes by their own hands) in this life, not because they haven’t “progressed” enough in holiness. They are perfectly holy in Christ. Period. The Christian life is not chronological from God’s perspective; but one single work of Christ. We are not getting better and better every day chronologically, but simultaneously saint and sinner every day until death or Christ’s return in glory. The Christian life needs to rely on the promises of Christ as well.

Consider Rev. Scaer again on this issue:

“Luther’s concept of *simul justus et peccator* is fundamental for a Lutheran understanding not only of justification but also of sanctification. Before God the person is totally justified and the same person is in himself and sees himself as a sinner. What is important in this understanding is the Latin word *simul*, at the same time, and not in a sequential sense as if one followed the other in point of time. Historically this distinction was lost in Lutheranism, as in the case of Pietism, where man is first justified and rescued from sin and then the work of sanctification begins. The end result is perfectionism or at least a mild form of it. The matter is viewed in this way: After a person is justified by faith, the new life of obedience sets in and progresses. Justification is seen as a past event in the Christian life and sanctification as a temporal result, separate and distinct from justification as the cause. Wherever justification and sanctification are separated from each other with this kind of temporal understanding, Lutheran theology is brought to ruin. Such a distinction common in Pietism was picked up by Wesley and characterizes the charismatic movement as its chief flaw. In Lutheran theology justification describes the believer’s relationship with God. Sanctification describes the same reality as does justification but describes the justified Christian’s relationship to the world and society. Justification and sanctification are not two separate realities, but the same reality viewed from the different perspectives of God and man. From the perspective of God the reality of the Christian is totally passive and non-contributory as it receives Christ only. From the perspective of the world, the same reality never ceases in its activity and tirelessly performs all good works. In this scheme the justification of the sinner never becomes a past event. In the phrase *simul justus et peccator* the *simul* carries the weight.Activism before God is an affront to Him and makes Christology meaningless. Passivism in the world prevents God from acting Christologically in the world and thus thwarts His purposes.”³

In the benefits to living a PDL, all the benefits rest on knowing my purpose, not knowing Christ crucified for me. Again, the Christian life is seen as a separate enterprise from justification, not distinguished from it as Holy Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions teach. His Christology does not inform the Christian life. For example, “knowing your purpose prepares you for eternity” (p.33). I beg to differ. Knowing my purpose has no power to change anything.. Just because God tells me to do something, doesn’t mean I can. We are sinful and unclean – the law of God cannot motivate us to do anything. This is a common error in modern evangelism. As a sinner, knowing my purpose gives me no comfort. It cannot motivate me (p 33). It cannot focus my life (p 32). Mr. Warren describes a life of separate and apart from Christ: who is our justification, sanctification, and redemption (1 Corinthians 1:30).

Mr. Warren also writes, “Life on earth is just the dress rehearsal before the real production (p. 36). “Life is just preparation for eternity” (p. 31). As a result of this separation of earth and heaven, no longer bridged by Christ’s presence among us, it is no longer surprising that Mr. Warren operates with the understanding that the Christian life depends on knowing our purpose. In his teaching it really is all about us (see also Chapter 6).

“The way you see your life shapes your life”. “How you define life determines your destiny” (p. 41). “To fulfill the purposes God made you for, you will have to challenge the conventional wisdom and replace it with the biblical metaphors of life”. (p. 42) “God constantly watches your response to people, problems, success, conflict, illness, disappointment, and even the weather! “But all of them have eternal implications” (p. 43). In each and every case, he places Christians back under the law as motivation for good works, the very same law that condemns the old Adam. Instead of putting the old Adam to death,

who will never believe the gospel, Mr. Warren continues at every turn to try and reform him, to dress him up in nice clothes.

This pattern continues throughout the book. “But we are commanded to recognize his glory, honor his glory, declare his glory, praise his glory, reflect his glory, live for his glory. Why? Because God deserves it!” (p. 54). “Jesus honored God by fulfilling his purpose on earth. We honor God the same way” (p. 55). No longer is Christ our Savior, but he is now the new lawgiver. Christ’s incarnation and presence is no longer for us, but to prod us to good works. “Look what I’ve done for you; what are you going to do for me” how God sees us according to Mr. Warren. This is the major theme throughout the book. Mr. Warren sees justification as something in the past, not something of any value to proclaim in the Christian life. By definition Mr. Warren does not really see us as having a sinful nature, dead in sin, still carrying the old Adam around, unable to keep the law perfectly. Although Mr. Warren says this book is about sanctification, it denies grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. *He places the Christian back under the law when what they really need is Christ’s life lived sinless under the law.*

God’s grace is conditioned upon our response in PDL. “It’s time to settle the issue. Who are you going to live for – yourself or God? You may hesitate wondering whether you will have the strength to live for God. Don’t worry. God will give you what you need if you will just make the choice to live for him”. “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”. “...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”.....If you sincerely meant that prayer, congratulations! Welcome to the family of God!” (p. 58 – 59).

Luther was absolutely right; the doctrine of justification is the article of the Church on which it stands or falls. Semi – Pelagianism (the believe that we contribute even a little bit in our justification or salvation) is clearly taught in PDL, and as a result, it’s virus trickles down into Mr. Warren’s teachings on the Christian life. Again, contrary to his statement, “it’s not about you”, it really is all about you.

Mr. Warren’s understanding of worship reflects this as well:

“Since pleasing God is the first purpose of your life, your most important task is to discover how to do that” He gives “The Message” paraphrase verse of Ephesians 5:10, which states, “Figure out what will please Christ, and then do it”. However, when consulting a bible that actually translates the very words of God, such as the ESV, the verse reads, “and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord.”. Notice what is missing? The added words, “and then do it”. Mr. Warren by choosing a paraphrase (more a commentary on Holy Scripture than the inspired Word of God) is able to find what he believes to be support for his faulty theology.⁴

“God smiles when we love him supremely”

“God smiles when we trust him completely”

“God smiles when we obey him wholeheartedly”

“God smiles when we praise and thank him continually” (p. 74 – 75)

“The heart of worship is surrender (p. 77; see also Chapter 13)

“God chose Mary to be the mother of Jesus, not because she was talented or wealthy or beautiful, but because she was totally surrendered to him”. (p. 82)

Notice that God cannot act until we have done something. This is contrary to how God saves us and how God sanctifies us.

“You may have to resurrender your life fifty times a day” (p. 84)

Again, Mr. Warren apparently believes Christ is our righteousness at the point of our “decision” for him, but afterwards, we need to have our own righteousness. A denial of the sinful nature can be the only conclusion. We all need to remember that God smiles because of Christ. When God sees us, he sees Christ and his righteousness. Remove Christ’s righteousness from the equation, and God’s wrath remains on us.

Again, worship, like the Christian life in Mr. Warren’s theology is all about what we do after all. He even goes as far as to say, “Passive worship is an oxymoron” (p. 106). The Lutheran reformers thought differently:

From the Small Catechism:

The Third Commandment

Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.

What does this mean?

We should fear and love God so that we do not despise preaching and His Word, but hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it. ²

“But faith is that which freely apprehends God's mercy on account of God's Word [which relies upon God's mercy and Word, and not upon one's own work]. If any one denies that this is faith [if any one imagines that he can rely at the same time upon God and his own works], he does not understand at all **33**] what faith is. [For the terrified conscience is not satisfied with its own works, but must cry after mercy, and is comforted and encouraged alone by God's Word.] And the narrative itself shows in this passage what that is which He calls love. The woman came with the opinion concerning Christ that with Him the remission of sins should be sought. This worship is the highest worship of Christ. Nothing greater could she ascribe to Christ”. (Apology to the Augsburg Confession²)

We receive Christ’s gifts in worship. Worship (or Divine Service) is ultimately about Christ giving us his gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation, and then our speaking back to him what he has promised to us in thanksgiving. Since worship in Mr. Warren’s understanding is thanksgiving for *past* gifts (which we have had some contribution toward in his understanding of salvation), worship is now all about us and our works. Christ is no longer present for us.

We see his faulty understanding of baptism is a reflection of his understanding of justification and the Christian life. His book is remarkably consistent in this manner. A lack of proper understanding of law and gospel, and of the sinful nature of even Christians makes his comments possible:

“For years I wondered why Jesus’ Great Commission gives the prominence to baptism as it does to the great tasks of evangelism and edification” (p. 120).

The Lutheran confessors knew why:

What does Baptism give or profit?

It works forgiveness of sins, delivers from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe this, as the words and promises of God declare.

How can water do such great things?

It is not the water indeed that does them, but the word of God which is in and with the water, and faith, which trusts such word of God in the water. For without the word of God the water is simple water and no

baptism. But with the word of God it is a baptism, that is, a gracious water of life and a washing of regeneration in the Holy Ghost, as St. Paul says, Titus, chapter three: *By the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Ghost, which He shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ, our Savior, that, being justified by His grace, we should be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life. This is a faithful saying.*

Mr. Warren, however, has missed the gift inherent in baptism:

“Then I realized it is because it symbolizes your death to your old life....”, “Baptism doesn’t make you a member of God’s family; only faith in Christ does that” (p. 120). Mr. Warren sees Baptism as law, not gospel. Our works, not God’s alone.

The explanation to the Ten Commandments in the Small Catechism makes it clear that that even the commands of God are really Christ working through us to love our neighbor. The negative prohibitions (you shall not steal) condemn the sinner, but the positive explanations (help our neighbor keep his possessions) are a fruit of our Baptism and the benefits of Christ’s death and resurrection being applied to us. Our sanctification is never alone from our salvation, never apart from Christ our righteousness.

Some will enjoy this book, but because it encourages the old Adam to keep fighting against Christ’s righteousness, thinking they bring something to the equation. Some will read this book and despair, because they realize that don’t “make God smile”, and perhaps get the impression that the Christian life really is all about my works. This book is indeed nothing new; it is repackaged American revivalism with a foundation of Calvinistic emphasis on the law with a Church Growth methodology bowtie. Through and through it is contrary to we believe, teach and confess as Christians under the cross. I cannot recommend Mr. Warren’s book, and strongly encourage Lutherans to rediscover the Small Catechism. There you will find:

I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.
(Galatians 2:20, ESV)

¹(http://www.christianity.com/partner/Article_Display_Page/0,,PTID307086|CHID581342|CIID1694210.0.html, 01/20/04)

² Triglot Concordia: The Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921).

³ Sanctification in Lutheran Theology, David P. Scaer, Concordia Theological Quarterly 49 (April-July 1985) no. 2-3:181-195. ©1985 Concordia Theological Quarterly

⁴ The choice of translation issues is beyond the scope of this paper. There is an appendix in PDL that gives all the bible verses and the translation that they came from. There are multiple examples in PDL of finding a paraphrase or version of the bible that will support Mr. Warren's theology. This is just one example. For those that have the book, I would encourage you to check his biblical references against a trusted translation such as the ESV, New King James, or the NIV. You would find this exercise very revealing. See also <http://www.issuesetc.org/resource/archives/purpose.htm>.