

Review of Rick Warren's *The Purpose Driven Life: What on Earth Am I Here For?*

Oakhurst Library Committee
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My Mother, nearing 90, and still possessing a razor-sharp mind, cautioned me to “behave yourself when you write that review” of Rick Warren’s *The Purpose Driven Life*. She had reason for concern: she loves this book and I don’t. She prompted me to read it three years ago when her United Methodist Church gave every family a copy. At that time, the whole religious community in Waco was engaged in 40 days of purpose-finding.

I just reread it and haven’t changed my mind. For me, Warren’s phenomenal best-seller offers the perfect textbook for why I abandoned Christianity for forty years—until I found Oakhurst in 2000. The book is religion dumbed-down to the level of a sixth grader, containing 1000 Biblical references paraphrased or adapted out of context from obscure translations, written in an upbeat Rotary Club style, and presenting God (in a borrowed phrase) as “a mega-super-sized chap” with a jolly face, perhaps a goatee (much like Warren’s own) Who smiles down when you are born, even though He knows up front that in 25 years you will become a serial killer.

The Book

The architecture of the book is simple: forty lessons for forty days “to find *your* purpose”. Each lesson contains opening quotes, crisp text, then, cleanly boxed “Points to Ponder,” “Verse to Remember,” and “Question to Consider.” The book’s first point to ponder is “It’s not about me.” The last point to ponder is “Living with purpose is the only way to *really* live.” A person’s five life purposes are repeated in the appendix: (1) You were planned for God’s pleasure, (2) You were formed for God’s family, (3) You were created to become like Christ, (4) You were shaped for serving God, and (5) You were made for a mission.

This message must resonate for the 25,000 churches that participated in congregation-wide “purpose-driven” campaigns, as my Mother’s church did. The book sold 25 million copies in the U.S. alone as of late 2006, stayed on *The New York Times* hardcover bestseller list for three years, and vaulted Rick Warren into the higher circles of world-famous evangelicals. He became “a frequent White House visitor and a self-described member of the Foreign Relations Committee.” His epithets from the book have been reprinted on Starbuck paper coffee cups. Keying “Rick Warren” into Google will give you over one million hits. This is all impressive.

Interestingly, a few far-right writers are still foaming at the mouth over the book—and its success. One Internet Christian critic wrote a mocking column, “The Purpose Driven Lie.” Another calls him “Ricky the Tricky.” A few label Warren a traitor for visiting Syria. They accuse him of being a “humanist” and embracing New Age practices. They criticize him for inviting Barak Obama to the Saddleback campus to talk about AIDS. One writer claims that his precepts of predestination and salvation of the elect are fuzzy, if he believes in them at all. In short, Warren may be a Southern Baptist, but he is not fundamentalist enough.

The Ministry

What I don't like about his ministry are none of those things, but rather certain concepts distilled from his book, the church website and articles I read for this review. He teaches that Gays are deviants that make sinful sexual choices—but are welcomed into the church for rehabilitation. Alcoholics are habitual sinners—not the victims of diseased minds. (Saddleback offers AAA-patterned meetings based on the Beatitudes). Psychotherapy is un-Christian. The Bible must be read literally: there was no rain on earth until Noah's flood. In the last Presidential election, he was an informal adviser to Bush's pre-election campaign. According to the *New York Times*, in 2004 Warren sent a letter to his thousands of networked pastors instructing them that abortion, stem-cell research, and same-sex marriage were non-negotiable election issues.

What do I sincerely admire about Rick Warren's ministry? Much of what *The New Yorker* praised him for in their Sept., 2005 issue. He has trained 350,000 pastors worldwide. He has mastered the management of small groups, no small feat, when administering the Saddleback Church membership of over 80,000. (For Warren, the purpose-driving life is a collective experience.) His global P.E.A.C.E. plan and Acts of Mercy "serves those infected and affected by AIDS." He is against fundamentalism in all religions.

The Man

What do I admire about Rick Warren, the man? He is a visionary, an entrepreneur, a marketing genius. He and his wife, Kate, give 90% of their earnings from books and other products to three foundations set up at Saddleback. His ideas evolve. He confessed to a Christian journalist that he will probably never again endorse another candidate for President. As described in the *New Yorker*, after becoming rich and famous, Warren's soul-searching led him to Psalm 72. There, Solomon prays for *more* wealth and influence so that he can help the widow and orphan...the poor. "That changed my life," Warren confessed to the writer. Warren told God, "... I'm sorry, widows and orphans have not been on my radar....So...I will use whatever affluence and influence that you give me to help those who are marginalized."

And so he has. Rabbi Harold Kushner paraphrases Psalm 146 in one of his books: "Whenever justice is meted out to the powerless, wherever people share their bread with the hungry, extending freedom to the oppressed, lend a hand to the afflicted, the lonely and the stranger, God is present."

Still, I had to ask Mother why she loved the book so much. "It had spiritual value for me," she patiently reminded me a few days ago. Millions of readers probably agree. As Kushner reminds us, "[P]eople's spiritual needs come in different forms." I love Rick Warren for his good works, but, no, I don't have a taste for his book or for some of his spiritual advice. Perhaps you do. We have two copies in the Oakhurst Library. Borrow one and find out for yourself.

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Warren, Rick. *The Purpose Driven Life: What on Earth Am I Here For?* Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2002.

Notes:

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Kushner, Harold. *Who Needs God?* Summit Books: New York, 1989.