

Analysis of Rick Warren's The Purpose Driven Life

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First, let me say that I find this book to be a very good book, *if certain presuppositions are held*. This prompts several further questions: are these *my* presuppositions and are they *biblical*, that is, are they gospel presuppositions? Warren has done a service to Christianity by pointing out that a real and vital, vibrant and living relationship to God is essential to Christian existence. He is saying that our daily experiences can all be interpreted as salvation-history, our lives, our histories, our stories do count, we count; God counts us, values us and esteems us.

All of this is correct as far as it goes. But as some have observed, there is something incomplete about all of this. What is missing? Well, what is missing is related to Warren's presuppositions. What are these?

First, is that Warren premises Jesus as the very nature of God himself (p 54), we are not in the dark, we are enlightened. This is a good Athanasian premise and Johannine metaphor and I completely agree as would any Christian I think. But this is a rare kind of statement in this book and it does not function as a hermeneutic of any sort. The problem follows in that there is not a Christological focus in operation in Warren's doctrine of God.

Warren takes his knowledge of God, not from Jesus, but from a flat reading of the Scriptures. To know God, Warren encourages us to go learn 'aspects of God's character' from an etymology of the varied Hebrew terms applied to God in the Hebrew Bible (104). This hermeneutic suggestion virtually eliminates any hope for discerning the kind of God Jesus believed in, preached and revealed. The 'Father' is completely identified with everything said about 'God' in the Hebrew Bible, lock, stock and barrel.

More so, it is possible to see the roots of the conservative Calvinist tradition behind the view of God presented in The Purpose Driven Life. Chapter 7 ("The Reason for Everything") begins with an assertion that paraphrases the Westminster Confession: "It's all for him [God]. The ultimate goal of the universe is to show the glory of God. It is the reason for everything that exists, including you. God made it *all* for his glory. Without God's glory, there would be nothing.

What is the glory of God? It is who God is. It is the essence of his nature, the weight of his importance, the radiance of his splendor, the demonstration of his power, and the atmosphere of his presence. God's glory is the expression of his goodness and all his other intrinsic, eternal qualities."

Here's Westminster (in 1647): "There is but one only living and true God, who is infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts or passions, immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty, most wise, most holy, most free, most absolute, working all things according to the counsel of his own immutable and most righteous will, for his own glory; most loving, gracious, merciful, long suffering, abundant in goodness and truth, forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin; the rewarder of them that diligently seek him; and with all most just and terrible in his judgments, hating all sin, and who will by no means clear the guilty."

At stake in this business of the glory of God, is Warren's identification of God's glory with the Shekinah of the Hebrew Bible, which functions as an affirmation of the Conquering, Empire Building, All-Powerful God. The Fourth Gospel moves in an entirely different direction. When the writer of the Fourth Gospel uses the terms $\delta\omicron\zeta\alpha$, $\delta\omicron\zeta\alpha\zeta\omega$ (among others), this glory of Jesus is always associated with his rejection and forgiveness on the cross. The Shekinah, for the writer of the Fourth Gospel, is preeminently displayed in Jesus-who-lays-down-his-life-for-others. It is the extraordinary mercy, grace and truth of God in Jesus (John 1.14-16) that is to be equated with 'glory' not an abstract set of metaphysical propositions.

The radical difference that Jesus brings in his articulation of the Creator, the $\alpha\beta\beta\alpha$, the one who loves the world, who heals the world, who brings peace and reconciliation is obscured in The Purpose Driven Life. Jesus' non-

retaliatory posture and teaching is never brought into conjunction with the Father. How Jesus acts is not an indicator of the character of the Father for Warren. Jesus' life connotes neither agency (as in the Fourth Gospel) nor priesthood (as in the Epistle to the Hebrews) for Warren. Warren's doctrine of God has no real christology. Warren's 'God' has yet to be deconstructed by Jesus.

This is important, for the God of Rick Warren is in fact not the Father of Jesus (not yet), Warren does not know it, but his God is more like Plato's than Jesus.' The evidence for this is in Warren's version of the gospel.

His doctrine of the atonement is a prime example. Warren premises an eternal hell and an eternal heaven (37, Platonic archetypes dressed in biblical language). This necessitates a punishing God, a need for law, justice and retribution. Warren preaches Anselm's penal satisfaction theory of the atonement. The good God buys off the righteously angry God. The penal satisfaction theory of the atonement fails in the long run for it cannot pass the creedal test where Jesus is and expresses and reveals the absolute inner character of the nature of God. Even though Warren has been taught the importance of this (54), he has not yet worked through its significance for all of his theology.

Warren's book appeals to people who are also struggling with the effects of the gospel on culture, where they want desperately to believe in a loving, caring, good God but first have to deal with the angry One. I would suggest that the satisfaction theory of the atonement is popular because it 'deals' with the angry God. It acknowledges this god and appeases him.

So we are left to have a relationship with a potentially angry and wrathful God (the God of our Puritan forefathers, the God of Calvinism and Augustine). I would ask Mr. Warren, can one have a healthy relationship with a God who is potentially such a threat? Do we ask children to go and try and have an intimate relationship with an adult whose temper is known to be short?

The Purpose Driven Life is still struggling to bring Gospel out of myth.

A second presupposition of Mr. Warren and one that is necessary for his anthropology, in spite of his understanding of Genesis 1-2, lies in his assumption of the western notion of the autonomous ego; the self or self-consciousness as the established center of human existence of what makes humans 'beings.' Warren accepts the metaphysics of individualism. There is a good dose of the Kantian 'knowing self' who dares to think in his anthropology (also found by way of humanism in Calvinist scholasticism). Referencing the autonomous ego, we might go further back to Descartes or even Aristotle through Aquinas. But we will end ultimately in Plato and Plato's anthropology, the philosophical self, self reflective and self-evolving. This is the dyadic structuring of relationships that results from dualism.

Plato's Republic consists of these 'selves' all structured by the philosopher, not as a Utopia, but as a totalitarian state, a state where arts and artists are cast out for they will not mime the mime of the 'polis.' There are scapegoats in Plato's anthropology and there have consistently been scapegoats in western anthropology since then. Warren's God thrives on scapegoats, sin offerings, and sacrifices. Warren is not to blame for this, Christianity worldwide is infected with Plato. This is the god of myth, not the God of the Gospel, the Father of Jesus.

But the gospel breaks through in The Purpose Driven Life even here. Warren consistently stresses *relationships* as essential to Christian existence. He is absolutely on the money about this. Relationality is not just a principle in physics but also in anthropology. Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer both emphasized this in their work on Genesis 1-3 as well as their respective ethics. Girard has coined the term 'interindividual' to underscore the non-conscious mimetic entanglements we have daily with others. This anthropology is triadic, there is you, me and us. All three are real, including our relationship, not just you and me. Christian anthropology will take its cue, not from the socio-political realm of Plato via Hobbes, but from the corporate metaphors that abound in New Testament Christology (Son of Man, Suffering Servant, Second Adam, the Vine, etc).

So, even though Warren's ecclesiology is a collection or gathering of autonomous egos, and he emphasizes fellowship, relationality as *an anthropological principle* is not in evidence. Any notion that we 'are' our relationships, any notion of corporate solidarity is evacuated. Warren's anthropology works itself out as the social contract now played out as church. Our external relation to agreed-upon Law is what defines our humanness. As long as we all agree on what is right we can exclude what is wrong. This is not the Body of Christ where we are all necessary to one another's existence. Warren's ecclesiology has more to say about Plato than Jesus.

Oddly, Warren notes the solution to his own problem, but fails to utilize it. He has nearly a thousand biblical references and says, "I haven't always quoted the entire verse, but rather focused on the phrase that was appropriate. My model for this is Jesus and how often he and the apostles quoted the Old Testament (sic). They often quoted just a phrase to make a point."

Warren has no idea that the reason that Jesus and the apostles only quoted partial texts was because at times they were also implicitly critiquing what had been written. Where Warren has a flat view of Scripture, Jesus and the apostolic church had a dynamic view of the relation of God's work and word.

First I want to look at two texts that are used by some to assert that Jesus affirmed in whole the authority of the Hebrew Bible. When Jesus quotes Psalm 110, he adds an aside 'David himself, speaking by the Holy Spirit declared...' Some see here a warrant for saying that the Hebrew Scriptures are 'God-breathed' (*à la* 2 Tim 3:16). But Jesus' selective use of Psalm 110 as a hermeneutic alternative to militant notions of Messiah vitiates that interpretation. More than likely, this phrase is meant ironically as in "Your Bible says this and since you believe your Bible is inspired you must answer the question." It has been shown that Jesus' could be just as ironic as Socrates.

In the discussion you will observe that Jesus challenges the 'teaching' of the scribes. They say the Messiah is the Son of David. That being the case, interjects Jesus, how can David call his son, 'Lord?' This makes no sense. More so, Jesus underscores the 'authority' of this text by declaring that David spoke by the Holy Spirit. In other words, you can't bypass this text, you have to deal with it. Jesus, speaking with beautiful irony then declares that the Messiah cannot be placed in the same context as David's son. This means that the 'Messiah' was to not be understood in Davidic warrior-king categories.

We have the same thing going on in John 10:34-39. Here Jesus, in describing his relationship to the Father, is about to be lynched. In this mob scene, Jesus is going to be publicly executed for violating 'law' that is, committing blasphemy. Jesus says, "Is it not written in your Law, 'I have said you are gods?' (Psalm 82:6) If he called them 'gods' to whom the word of God came – and the Scripture cannot be broken – what about the one whom the Father set apart and sent into the world?" Once again the phrase "and Scripture cannot be broken" is used ironically. Not only can this be demonstrated within the larger Johannine use of irony but also in the fact that the law referred to has a possessive pronoun, it is "your Law." In neither case do we need to see in the texts some kind of theory of inspiration; on the contrary, both texts give us a theory of non-inspiration. What do I mean by this?

When we looked at Mark 12 and Jesus' use of Psalm 110, we saw that Jesus' explicitly chose to refute the Hasmonean interpretation by not quoting Psalm 110: 2-3, 5-7. Jesus refused to perceive his mission in terms of a militant deliverer. Jesus explicitly rejected this 'christology' and it is something he does throughout the entire gospel tradition. Remember, even the disciples didn't get it while he was alive, how much less the crowds or the authorities. But this use of Psalm 110 is indicative of a hermeneutic.

This same hermeneutic can be found in Matthew 5 where Jesus contrasts his speech with that of Moses in the Torah. No matter how you slice it, Matthew 5:17-20 is not about abolition of Torah but about its fulfillment, a fulfillment seen in the 'I say unto you' portions. It is the rejection of religion and the affirmation of the spirituality (and sociology) of forgiveness and non-retribution. It is the rejection of a militant spirituality, just as Jesus' use of Psalm 110 is a rejection of anti (= militant) Christology.

This can be further seen in Jesus' use of Isaiah. We have greatly benefited from Bruce Chilton's research on Jesus' use of the Isaiah Targum. Unquestionably, Isaiah was Jesus' favorite book, the lens through which he perceived his people's history. In Luke 4 and in Luke 7, Jesus cites the Isaiah text and four out of four times (at a minimum) Jesus omits the continuing Isaianic theme of vengeance on the Gentiles. This is again of a piece with Jesus' hermeneutic on demythologizing the 'violent' God.

In each case where Jesus cites Isaiah, it is always in the context of one way or another challenging his hearers to consider what God without retribution would look like. This similar principle can also be found in Jesus' parables. In the parables, familiar eschatological imagery is given a turn on its head. For example, the kingdom is God is never conceived of as a reign of coercion, rather, God is like the parent who cares not for honor or status but humbles himself and RUNS to his estranged child. God's reign is a place where sparrows are fed and lilies are clothed. Jesus' parables are subversive (Herzog) by their very insistence that God is not like that which had been conceived.

Now, Anabaptists have always recognized a Christological center to Scripture. They did not ask 'How is Jesus like God?' but 'How is God like Jesus?' This is how I would start my reflections. If I ever had the opportunity to sit down with Mr. Warren, I would want to turn him onto taking what he says and applying it to the God whom Jesus reveals. Jesus practiced what he preached. It is this principle of positive imitation that underlies the Johannine anthropology and Christology (John 5:19ff). I would suggest to Rick Warren the Christological implications of following Jesus and thus, knowing and loving God.

How shall we then live? Warren does not perceive Jesus as a model for lifestyle and behavior. He says "Christ likeness is not produced by imitation but by inhabitation (referencing the Holy Spirit)." Like Plato, Warren banishes mimesis (imitation) from his blessed realm and the Christian is left trying to figure out which laws in the Bible still apply and which ones don't. Every single church split has occurred as people wrestle with the definition of these legal hermeneutical boundaries. 'Godly habits', although not defined (175), are equated with 'the character of Christ.' But what Godly habits is Warren referring to? Not smoking, not drinking, non-promiscuity? Or caring for the sick and the poor, casting out demons and announcing the good news of God's immanence? He says, "Christlikeness is the result of making Christlike choices." How would Warren describe these choices if he will not consider Jesus' life as an example? How can Warren ignore the technical use of the term *ακολουθεω* (to follow) in Matthew, the Johannine christology of agency or Paul's use of the term *μιμεσις* (imitate)?

Discussing abilities (gifts, talents) that God uses (242-243), Warren lists over 30 different types of vocations from artists and scholars to tailors and teachers, farmers and managers. In this list of gifts God uses, is mentioned 'making weapons' and 'being a soldier.' Now let me get this right. Christlike choices determine godliness according to Warren. But can he really see Jesus choosing to polish his Smith and Wesson, or sharpen knives for the revolution? Would Jesus assist in the manufacture of atomic or biological weapons or the construction of an Abrams tank? Does Warren see Jesus carrying a dagger or a machete, an AK-47 or Mace? Does he think Jesus would go out on patrol and fire his gun, shot a round of white phosphorus or throw a grenade? How in the world does Warren come to these vocational conclusions? He either takes S.G.F. Brandon's thesis seriously that Jesus was a militant reactionary or he has not studied the Gospels very well.

If Warren would allow himself a Christological center to his Bible reading, he could then affirm the imitation of Jesus, taking seriously the notion of disciple as apprentice, and affirming the positive imitation of Jesus. We could talk about Christian Life as witnessing to the end of enmity and hate and discrimination. Sadly, Warren is still wedded to his legal God and the 'rule of law' (a necessary correlate of his penal atonement theory). He has yet to perceive what Paul has said about 'Christ being the end of the law.'

Christianity has long struggled with the place of 'Law' in the Christian life, but unlike Paul and the vast majority of the apostolic church, Christianity has placed the Law front and center. This is particularly evident as the church developed following the ascension of Constantine to the throne. Both Hebrew Scriptures and Roman law lie behind modern jurisprudence.

Protestants chide Catholics for their adherence to law (canon law, moral law, cultic law, etc) yet seem to be unaware that they too have missed the point, and like the pre-converted Saul, are completely unaware of their zealous devotion to law. The debates following the Reformation about the place of the Law in the Christian life were only possible because neither Luther nor Calvin were able to see clearly on this subject. Although interpreters of Paul, they simply could not follow Paul in this direction instead opting for the post-Augustinian solution, an admixture of law and gospel. The relationship of law to gospel has been debated clear into the present.

From the second century church until now, we find that Christianity cannot seem to exist without some relationship to Law. More is the pity, for the New Testament is clear that we are set free from the Law, not by denigrating the Jewish Torah (how much anti-Semitism there is in the churches!), but by recognizing that in the new covenant the Law is placed in our hearts. This is not to be equated with some Freudian super-ego (although it can be misunderstood and experienced as such). Rather, the solution, for Paul, is the pneumatic presence of God active within us and living in us consistent with God's own internal character. Or christologically we may say it is Christ obeying the Father in and through us. This is the direction of Paul's thought. This is the change in our thinking to which we referred earlier. And this is the point of Paul's discussion of the Holy Spirit.

We recall that both Luther and Calvin were uncomfortable with those in their time that had suggested such. They were called 'spiritualists' or 'enthusiasts.' And they were hunted down and exterminated. Of course, Catholics have long shunned these types as well. Why is this so? Because the church, in its brokenness, needs law to control its members. Yet, no single New Testament author seems to move in this direction, even the Letter of James.

Is the Holy Spirit then an internal law? No. God is not law; God is love. The Spirit is the presence of God to us. Simply put, as we are aware of God with us, we will know how to live and act in love. If we are not aware of this we need an external law to tell us what to do. Christians do not seem, for the most part, to be aware that they need no external law. Christians are to be led by the Spirit that comes from the Father through the Son (the *Christus Praesens*). We have been rather afraid of this throughout the history of the Church because we sense that without Law there can only be licentiousness. Following Jesus or being led by the Spirit may in fact lead to a 'breaking' of the law or cultural mores. We see this in the Gospels in Jesus' life. There is a following of Jesus that will always appear to be outside the norm of the Law and it is frightening to those who have made the law central to their Christian life. For the Christian, however, doing God's will is not an impersonal obedience to an external Law, it is a personal obedience to a loving, caring, saving God.

Further, the Spirit is not a quantifiable reality; therefore, the Spirit cannot be controlled either by the academy or the Church. Neither can culture or cultural law control the Spirit although it may attempt to do so. Our personal relationship with Jesus has its own internal dynamic of obedience or listening. This is the point of Paul in Romans 6-8 or the Sermon on the Mount or the last meal discourse of the Johannine Gospel. We are brought into an extraordinary relationship with the Trinitarian God, before whom we live, in whom we find all meaning, to whom we render thanksgiving, love and our wills, and through whom we find ourselves living redemptively.

In conclusion, theological correctness or orthodoxy is not just an intellectual game. What we confess about God has implications for everything else we say and think and do. Morality and theology are flip sides of a coin. If one has a Gnostic (dualistic or Platonic) theology, one's ethics will concomitantly be Gnostic. Post-modern Christianity can hardly afford to simply waltz by difficult theological questions or sweep them under the rug in the name of some amorphous notion of unity. Think about it. What if the early church had not become involved with the Gnostics? What if they said well it doesn't really matter what you believe as long as you sincerely believe it?

What are the results of a Gnosticized Protestantism, grounded more in Plato and less in Jesus? Philip Lee in [Against the Protestant Gnostics](#) suggests rejection of the good earth, a disdain for the ecology of the planet and a concomitant acceptance of the Bomb, our willingness to destroy physical reality with militant technology; the triumphal vision of the autonomous self and its private revelations; the separation of the sacred and the secular and the consequence of escape from any social ethic; the worship of the Individual and equality for the few. Sound all too familiar?

When I challenge Rick Warren's view of God or Jesus, his hermeneutic or view of Scripture, I am saying that theology counts as much as devotion, for theology is the articulation of our experience in the light of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. If we begin with false premises or faulty presuppositions we will end up misinterpreting our experience and as a result our social ethics will not be Christ centered. Warren's claims about God at times border on the heretical and have far more to do with law than Gospel.

In the Gospel, "violence is not an attribute of God" (Epistle to Diognetus). In the kingdom of God we do not have a violent God and therefore violence is not a tool for social structuring. Because we do not have a God who desires or needs scapegoats or satisfaction, we would not need to scapegoat others. We could be forgiving and forgiven, loving and loved (in short, we could be church, the eschatological community in the here and now).

We can see why it is important to have an anthropology whose consequences help us see that we are all in this together, as a species. Humans are a corporate personality. Everybody counts. Our Christian anthropology can then be hermeneutically consistent, and leave our ethics looking a lot like Jesus.

I am left glad for the fact that this book will create a hunger in people for relationship with God; I am left frustrated that Warren has not really proclaimed the Gospel, yet. I look forward to when that happens. I know what The Purpose Driven Life looks like thanks to Rick Warren, but what I want to know is what does The Jesus Driven Life look like? This is a conversation waiting to happen. For now, I'll go back and read Bonhoeffer, Kierkegaard or the Blumhardt's.

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