

The Purpose Drivel Life

By Jake Zabel, BTh

In recent decades the Church Growth Movement has built inroads into the Lutheran Church. Many churches have become outward focused, focusing all their attention on those outside the church. Starting with the noble intent of saving the lost and bringing new people into the church, many of these congregations have become fanatical about pleasing the “seekers” and the unchurched. Many of these “missional” churches have become so focused on the outward mission of the church to the lost that they have lost sight of the inward mission of church to the laity. The danger here is that these churches can become so focused on the unchurched, that they forget their duty to the Word and the sheep, and sacrifice the Gospel message in attempts to bring in the goats.

Many of these churches, in attempts to become relevant, have moved away from the longstanding teachings of the Lutheran Confessions concerning church and mission. Instead they have turned their attention to the resources of the pop-evangelical churches in order to discover their “purpose” as a church.

Rick Warren’s *The Purpose Driven Life*, which contains the *Forty Days of Purpose* bible study, is a perfect example of the types of Church Growth materials that have infiltrated the Lutheran Church. Congregations and individuals have turned to Rick Warren’s books *The Purpose Driven Life* and *The Purpose Driven Church* in order to determine their purpose in the life of the church and the church’s involvement in mission. These resources, however, do more damage to the mission of the church than they do good.

Rick Warren’s *The Purpose Driven Life* is a resource that churches need to be wary with when using. The book contains issues that are very damaging to the church and its mission. However, the book does possess a lot of good characteristics that the church could benefit from.

Firstly, despite its fanatical focus on trying to get everyone and anyone inside the church (a common trait of the Church Growth Movement), the call for the church to look outwards is an important and often necessary wakeup call to those churches that have become fanatically inward focused.

Secondly, while Warren places a rather heavy emphasis upon sanctification and the third use of the Law, a lot of what he says is accurate. His style of teaching the development of the Christian life may not be appropriate (in fact it may be damaging to the soul) but much of his actual teaching is true, and to condemn it or to disregard it would be to throw away Christian truth.

And thirdly, unlike other leaders in the Church Growth Movement Warren doesn’t compromise God’s Word in order to bring people into the church. In the introduction to his book *Testing the Claims of Church Growth* Rodney Zwonitzer points out the difference between being product orientated and customer orientated (:13). Being product orientated means selling what the producer wishes to sell, marketing is then based around convincing the customer that what you’re

selling is the best that there is and that they need to buy your product. Being customer orientated, however, means building your product around the wants and desires of the customer. Instead of trying to make the customer want what you're selling, you sell what the customer wants. Sadly a common trait among the Church Growth Movement (although few will admit to doing it) is to compromise the Word of God and instead teach people what they want to hear. Instead of preaching Law and Gospel, many of these churches proclaim prosperity, self-help advice and personal experiences, in an attempt to be more relevant and exciting. Warren, however, focuses his attention on proclaiming the truth. Warren makes a huge emphasis on Scriptural Truth through his book. Warren criticizes people and churches who base their choices upon "unreliable authorities: culture ("everyone is doing it"), tradition ("we've always done it"), reason ("it seemed logical"), or emotion ("it just felt right")." (:187) Instead the Word of God should be the authority on which we base our lives – "the Bible must always have the first and last word in my life." (:187) In his earlier book, *The Purpose Driven Church*, Warren refutes the myth that a church must compromise the Scriptural message in order to grow. (:53) Warren even goes to great lengths in the opening chapter of *The Purpose Driven Life* to point out that his book is not a self-help book but a guide based upon the truth of God's Word.

Rick Warren is not trying to change the church to be, what Zwonitzer called, people pleasers (see Zwonitzer chap. 1) who compromise the message of church in order to "become all things to all people" (1 Cor. 9:22). Instead, Warren's goal is to perfect the church. His aim is not to change the Church's message but instead to change the people and the congregation so that the message can be better proclaimed. This is what he calls "being contemporary without compromising". (1995: 55) While his intentions are noble, and changing the church is sometimes beneficial and necessary (e.g. the Reformation), there are two major issues with Warren's idea of change.

The first is Warren's idea that if you just do things in a certain way and follow his particular method of doing things then everything will go fine. He is convinced that if we just lived better, worked harder and preached proper then the churches will grow warmer, deeper, stronger, broader and larger. (Warren 1995: 49)

The second issue is that Warren is not Lutheran. Many Lutheran congregations are being heavily influenced by the Church Growth Movement. While Warren is all for preaching true doctrine, a confessional Lutheran would not necessarily consider Warren's theological interpretations 'true doctrine'. Warren is a Southern Baptist and his theological views flow throughout *The Purpose Driven Life*. Any Lutheran congregation who adopts his book as a resource must be very wary of Warren's non-Lutheran teachings.

The greatest theological difference between Warren and a Lutheran is his understanding and use of Law and Gospel. Warren does not see the Law as that which 'shows us our sins' and brings us to repentance. Instead Warren sees the Law as merely a list of requirements that I must do in order to reach a sanctified life. His entire book is made up of imperatives of what I must do. Warren even turns the new obedience, which is a gift from the Holy Spirit's indwelling (FC epit. IV.15), into something

that I must choose to do, “I must choose to obey God in faith.” (:95) Warren does acknowledge the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, and that change comes by the power of Spirit. But this change begins with me and depends upon my choice “We choose to do the right thing in situations **and then** trust God’s Spirit to give us his power, love, faith, and wisdom to do it.” (:174, **emphasis mine**)

Warren is correct in his statement that we obey God (or at least lead a holier life) due to being forgiven and set free, but he also bases the new obedience in my own choices and my own love and gratitude for Christ, “We obey God... because **WE** love him and trust that he knows what is best for us.” (:95, **emphasis mine**)

Warren’s Law is all third use; it’s all about developing my character, and reaching Christlikeness. Warren rarely (if ever) makes reference to the second use of the Law. In certain places Warren even denies the second use of Law, “God doesn’t expect you to be perfect, but he does insist on complete honesty.” (:92) Warren goes on to state “if perfection was requirement for friendship with God, we would never be able to be his friends.” For Warren perfection under the Law is not a requirement for salvation, instead what is required is an authentic, honest relationship with God “I’m as close to God, as I choose to be.” (:99) Warren has removed the Law of God and replaced it with his own Law of Relationship, stating that in order for me to have a relationship with God I must: choose to obey God (:95), value what God values (:96), desire friendship with God more than anything else (:97).

Warren’s view that God does not demand perfection is just not biblical. The Bible tells us that we are to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect (Matt.5:48) and that whoever fails to keep the whole Law, but fails in just one aspect, is guilty of breaking all of the Law (James 2:10).

Warren just flatly denies the second use of the Law, which is to show us our sins and bring us to repentance. He states that God knows that we are incapable of being perfect and instead God looks at the attitude of our heart. (:76)

Since Warren does not see the Law as that which demands perfection, he destroys the Gospel message. The Gospel message is justification by grace through faith, instead Warren sees the Gospel as the process of sanctification in which we become more Christlike and share in a deeper relationship with God. For Warren salvation comes by faith, but faith is not seen as a reception of God’s grace but as an act of obedience. It’s all about my choice and God’s response to my decision, “God waits for you to act first.” (:175)

Warren’s whole theology depends not on justification but on sanctification. This then plays into Warren’s view of the church and mission.

According to Luther the purpose of the church is for the sinner to receive preaching and to be brought to Christ (LC 2.37) so that through the Christian Church we may receive the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting (.41). The Augsburg Confession describes the Church as the assembly of believers where the gospel is purely preached and the Sacraments are rightly administrated (VII.1). Therefore the purpose of the local church is to preach the comforting

words of the gospel, administer the Sacraments and provide the absolution of sins. (LC 2.54-55)
Through these means of grace, the Holy Spirit calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes us holy. (SC 2.5)
Hence the purpose of the church, as expressed in the Lutheran Confessions, is first and foremost justification, and then out of this justification flows sanctification.

Warren however, believes that the purpose of church is sanctification. The purpose of the church is character development and determining my purpose when it comes to serving God and my neighbour. Warren teaches that there are five purposes for the church: to help you focus on God, to face life's problems, fortify your faith, find your talent and fulfil your mission. (:136) Warren opens his study with the word "it's not about you." (:17) This practically sums up Warren's entire purpose for the church and for you. For Warren, church is not about God serving you through Word and Sacrament. Instead it's all about you serving God and your neighbour. The Word and the Sacraments are there simply to give you the strength and abilities to perform these services.

For Warren church and mission is all about what you do. The purpose of your life is twofold, serve God and serve your neighbour (i.e. Matt. 22:37-39). For Warren worship "isn't for our benefit! We worship for God's benefit." (:66) For Warren church and mission is not about God serving us through means and vessels, instead church is about serving God and mission is about serving our neighbour (those outside the Church).

For Warren the benefits I receive in church are all about making me more Christlike, so that I can have a better relationship with God by serving him better. One of the greatest discomforts in his teachings is that church is all about serving better. This burdens the conscience when the Christian discovers that he isn't serving better. Chapter 34 of *The Purpose Driven Life* is all about being a "real" servant and how a "real" servant acts. For Warren "real" servants serve with a fivefold mindset. (:265) Warren lists five obligations that I must do in order to be a "real" servant: think more about others than myself, think like a steward and not an owner, think about my work and not the work of others, identify in Christ and last see ministry as an opportunity not an obligation. Warren teaches that these are the marks of a "real" servant. This creates discomfort among believers who do not live a perfect, Christlike life, and are unable to see themselves as "real" servants. Because of this they become crushed by the Law and are not able to find any relief from the Gospel, because Warren teaches that the Gospel equals sanctification. Warren's fifth point is also a contradictory statement because saying that *I must not feel obligated* is an obligation in itself.

When it comes to the issue of mission, Warren, like many in the Church Growth Movement, makes two great errors that are damaging to the church's mission. These are: outward focus and everyone is a missionary. These two teaching are not in and of themselves bad, but the fanatical obsession that the Church Growth Movement has for them is.

Firstly everyone is a missionary/minister theology. It is not wrong for lay people to go out and proclaim the Gospel message, in fact we are called to serve one another and to preach Christ to the world. The Lutheran doctrine of vocation would support the idea that every member of the church has

a duty to minister to the world. The *Doctrinal Statements and Theological Opinions of the Lutheran Church of Australia* on mission teaches that every Christian is a witness for Christ. (11: 1.7) However, when you read Warren's book you will find that one member of the church is missing, the pastor. When it comes to Church Growth, the pastors do not shepherd their sheep (congregation). Instead the pastors spend their time coaching the sheep to go and serve the church in mission. They "try to get the sheep to shepherd the lost sheep." (Zwonitzer: 84) For Warren it's all about getting the sheep out into the world to do the work of the shepherd. For Warren the entire purpose of my life is a commitment to the Great Commandment and the Great Commission (:306). The fivefold purpose of my life is to: (1) love God, (2) love my neighbour, (3) go and make disciples (4) baptising them and (5) teaching them. For Warren it's not about the church's mission but about my own personal mission, .This is not the same as the doctrine of vocation, every Christian may be called to be a witness for Christ, but "not everyone is called to be a missionary. Not everyone is called to be a pastor." (Woodford: 163-4)

This leads us into the other issue of Warren and mission. Warren's idea of thinking globally instead of locally (:300) and shifting the focus outside of our own congregation, again is not necessarily a bad thing. The issue with Warren is that he has not only taken the mission focus outside the church but away from the church. As I mentioned above, for Warren the purpose of the church is not to comfort the sinner with justification but to develop the believer through sanctification, "God's ultimate goal for your life on earth is not comfort, but character development." (:173) Warren believes that God wants to redeem and reconcile human beings so that we can fulfil the five purposes of our life: to love him, be a part of His family, become like Him, serve him and tell others about Him. (:282) Once we are saved God uses us to save others, "He saves us and then sends us out." (:282) This statement is true, but the issue is that Warren is focused on our sending and not on our saving. He skips over the part that those in the church also need to hear the Gospel message of the forgiveness of sins. It all becomes about sending the "saved" (those in church) and saving the lost (those outside of church). Mixing Warren's emphasis on sanctification and his fanatical focus on outwards mission, the Word of God devolves into Law (3rd use only) for the church and Gospel for the unchurched.

The influence of the Church Growth Movement has grown in recent decades. The movement's influence has spread into the Lutheran Church and many congregations have adopted resources such as Rick Warren's *The Purpose Driven Life*. While Warren's book does contain a lot of good points and helpful advice, its focus is all about the individuals own choices and service. And its mission focus is entirely aimed at serving the outsiders, leaving the church-goers discomfited and pressured to become better servants. While his book appears to be more Scriptural than the typical Church Growth resources, Lutherans should be very wary as his teachings on Law and Gospel do more damage than good for the Church and its mission.

Bibliography

- LCA, (1993, edited 2001) *DOCTRINAL STATEMENTS AND THEOLOGICAL OPINIONS OF THE LUTHERAN CHURCH OF AUSTRALIA: A Statement on Mission*
- Kolb, Robert and Timothy J Wengert, eds, (2000). *The Book of Concord: the confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN, USA
- Sasse, Hermann. Trans Norman Nagel (1986). *We Confess vol.3: The Church*, Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, MO, USA
- Warren, Rick. (2002). *The Purpose Driven Life*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, USA
- Warren, Rick. (1995). *The Purpose Driven Church: Growth Without Compromising Your Message & Mission*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, USA
- Woodford, Lucas. (2012). *Great Commission, Great Confusion, or Great Confession? The Mission of the Holy Christian Church*, Wipf & Stock, Eugene, OR, USA
- Zwonitzer, Rodney. (2002). *Testing the Claims of Church Growth*, Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, MO, USA