

A Review of *The Purpose Driven Life* From an Abuse Survivor's Perspective

by Diane Stelling

Maybe I've got it all wrong. Maybe I'm just too simplistic. I recently finished reading *The Purpose Driven Life* by Rick Warren and I am greatly disturbed by what I read. Ostensibly, he presents many of the classic good things we should all know about God, love, and salvation. There is an undercurrent running throughout this work, however, that belies what is on the surface and describes a God who is legalistic, demanding, and punitive rather than one who is calmly loving and comforting.

Normally, I would just cast aside a book like this and watch the latest fad in Christianity run its course. But I am a survivor of abuse and someone who speaks out publicly in order to educate people regarding the spiritual needs of abuse victims - all forms of abuse. Because of this, I feel compelled to comment about this book and its potential danger for anyone who is currently being abused or who has ever experienced abuse. Additionally, I am greatly concerned whenever Scripture is used as a means to allow people to judge others and to allow abusive environments to be created or enabled.

In his book, Rick Warren purports that it is all about *God*, not about *us*. As I read further, however, I am left with a sense of urgent frenzy about what *I* must do and the choices that *I* must make in my life to please and appease God. I am not left with a sense of reassurance because of the salvation that has already been earned for me by the atoning death of Jesus Christ. I am left with a great fear of what will happen to me if I don't measure up to God's expectations of me - will I lose my eternal rewards? There is a strong focus in this book on the Law, on what God commands of us, as opposed to the free gift of God's grace and mercy that is promised in the Gospel. Abuse victims know the Law only too well. Their abusive experiences consist of futilely trying to measure up to their abusers' earthly rules.

I believe that the God I know, the one whose presence I have felt so intimately in my life, very plainly and simply loves me. Unconditionally, no strings attached. God is love. He demands nothing from me except that I come to him with the innocence of a child, and he is willing to accept me just as I am. I do not have to prove myself to the Lord or to anyone else. The reassurance that God loves me without question, warts and all, no matter what, leaves me with an incredible sense of contentment and security, and it affords me the freedom to be whatever the Lord wants me to be.

I do not need to continually search for my life's purpose on my own or to worry that I am not living up to the Lord's expectations. He will mold me into what he wants me to be. This does not necessarily mean that God will reveal the entire plan for my life to me up front. I know without a doubt that God will indicate to me, through various means, what his unique purpose is for my life, each and every step of the way.

That is where my faith comes in. Alone and apart from God I am spiritually dead. It is only through the Holy Spirit dwelling within me that the Lord instills me with faith, and it is only by the continuing work of the Holy Spirit within me that my faith grows and I am led to a life of service to God. I can step out each day in assurance, knowing that God has my best interests at heart, even if I do not always agree with him. I live with confidence that the Lord will direct my ways because I believe and trust in him completely.

The fact that *The Purpose Driven Life* is a New York Times bestseller and by now several million copies of it have been sold indicates to me that there are an extraordinary number of people in our society who are searching for answers and who are seeking some sort of spiritual connection to God. People are looking for a formula, a prescription, or a blueprint that describes how to find meaning in their lives.

We are the “programmed” generation, and the use of the word “Driven” in the title of this book mimics the times and world within which we live. One of the problems in our society is that we spend too much time filling our lives and the lives of our children with activities, with “stuff,” with things that we *need* to do in order to enrich our lives, to fill up the void in our souls. There is very little time left over for any introspection or quiet communing with God.

In his book, Rick Warren seeks to replace the fervor that people exhibit in filling their lives with material things by offering instead that people redirect that fervor towards pursuing God. There is nothing inherently wrong in this concept, as a matter of fact, we *should* devote our lives to serving the Lord. Where it all breaks down is in Warren’s pedantic and dogmatic approach regarding how we are to accomplish this. It’s all about “doing” rather than “being.”

Rick Warren promises that he has found the answers. Just follow his plan and in 40 days, by reading 40 chapters in his book, you, too, will know all the answers. I am extremely wary of people who speak in absolutes. I am extremely wary of people who claim that they have *the* solution, the *Holy Grail*, if you will. I am extremely wary of people who state their theory as fact and then go about giving the details of this theory assuming that the reader accepts, without question, their original premise as the indisputable truth. I am extremely wary of people who state things from God’s perspective, who explain what God’s thoughts and feelings are about given situations. How can any of us possibly know what God is thinking?

The overall structure of the purpose-driven life is presented, not for discussion, but with complete certainty. The five elements are: 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, and you were made for a mission. These are the bedrock “truths” that Rick Warren claims *must* be adhered to in order for you to live your life with purpose.

When I read through *The Purpose Driven Life*, the one thought that kept coming to my mind over and over again was “Pharisee.” The Pharisees were a major religious group in Israel at the time of Christ. They took the original Laws set down in the Old Testament and added over 600 additional laws that they felt needed to be obeyed in order to follow God. Rick Warren has

created an elaborate structure of “rules,” things we *must* do in order to succeed in a purpose-driven life. For example, here are a few of the “musts”:

“To be a healthy disciple of Jesus, feeding on God’s Word must be your first priority.....abiding in God’s Word includes three activities.....I must accept its authority.....I must assimilate its truth.....There are five ways to do this: You can receive it, read it, research it, remember it, and reflect on it.....I must apply its principles.” (pp. 186-191)¹

“But you can keep your life balanced and on track by joining a small group for accountability, by regularly evaluating your spiritual health, by recording your progress in a personal journal, and by passing on what you learn to others. These are four important activities for purpose-driven living. If you are serious about staying on track, you will need to develop these habits.” (p. 306)

“There are many “good” things you can do with your life, but God’s purposes are the five essentials you *must* do.” (p. 313)

By the time I finished reading the book I realized that there are so many things that I am required to do that I would be unable to remember all of them, even if I wrote them down and kept them in front of me on a daily basis. Not only that, I was concerned about what would happen to me if I did not complete all of these “musts.”

The more I read, the more apprehensive I became, because throughout *The Purpose Driven Life*, God’s love for us is described as conditional. *If* I do certain things, only *then* God will bestow good things on me. If I do not do exactly what I am supposed to do, then I will not receive these blessings:

“Friends share secrets, and God will share his secrets with you if you develop the habit of thinking about his Word throughout the day.....The more time you spend reviewing what God has said, the more you will understand the ‘secrets’ of this life that most people miss. The Bible says, ‘*Friendship with God is reserved for those who reverence him. With them alone he shares the secrets of his promises.*’” (p.91)

“However, Jesus made it clear that obedience is a condition of intimacy with God. He said, ‘*You are my friends if you do what I command.*’” (p.95)

“How you manage your money affects how much God can bless your life.” (p. 267)

As a human being, I am imperfect and unable to keep all of God’s commandments. Nowhere in this book is there any mention of God’s forgiveness for me when I stray.

¹ Warren, Rick, *The Purpose Driven Life*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan. 2002). All subsequent quotations in this paper are cited from the same source with appropriate page number references.

The implication is that I must continue to earn God's good favor by doing everything that he asks. This is a hopeless and futile situation because the reality is we can *never* be good enough to earn anyone's love, not even God's. Only Jesus was good enough.

The premise that God's love is conditional is also a devastating idea for abuse victims because it reinforces the model of their earthly experience. Victims live in an earthly environment where love is conditional, and their abuse or rewards are dependent upon their abuser's evaluation of their performance of every little task. A victim's hope comes in the form of unconditional love from God and from another human being. Everyone has a need to be accepted for who they are and to be forgiven when they fall short of expectations. My hope comes from knowing that because of Christ, even though I cannot live up to all of his expectations, God forgives me and loves me unconditionally.

Expanding on the conditional nature of God's relationship with us and his "insider's" knowledge of what the Lord is going to do, Rick Warren defines for us what God's view of life is. Warren is primarily focused and fixated on the idea that life is a test, or series of tests:

"The Bible offers three metaphors that teach us God's view of life: Life is a *test*, life is a *trust*, and life is a *temporary assignment*."A very important test is how you act when you can't feel God's presence in your life.....When you understand that life is a test, you realize that *nothing* is insignificant in your life..... Some tests seem overwhelming, while others you don't even notice. But all of them have eternal implications.....Every time you pass a test, God notices and makes plans to reward you in eternity." (pp. 42-44)

"One day you will stand before God, and he will do an audit of your life, a final exam, before you enter eternity. The Bible says, *Remember, each of us will stand personally before the judgment seat of God....Yes, each of us will have to give a personal account to God.*' Fortunately, God wants us to pass this test, so he has given us the questions in advance. From the Bible we can surmise that God will ask us two crucial questions: First, 'What did you do with my son Jesus Christ?'..... Second, 'What did you do with what I gave you?'.....The first question will determine where you spend eternity. The second question will determine what you do in eternity. By the end of this book you will be ready to answer both questions." (p.34)

Not only are we going to be tested at every turn, but according to Warren, God is up in heaven keeping score and is going to evaluate us on everything we do down to the minutest aspect of our lives:

"At the end of your life on earth you will be evaluated and rewarded according to how well you handled what God entrusted to you. That means everything you do, even the simple daily chores, has eternal implications. If you treat everything as a *trust*, God promises three rewards in eternity. First, you will be given God's *affirmation*.....Next, you will receive a *promotion*.....Then you will be honored

with a *celebration*.....God watches how we use money to test how trustworthy we are.” (pp.45-46)

“We will be evaluated on our love. The third reason to make learning to love the goal of your life is that it is what we will be evaluated on in eternity. One of the ways God measures spiritual maturity is by the quality of your relationships.” (p. 126)

“At the end of your life on earth you will stand before God, and he is going to evaluate how well you served others with your life. The Bible says, *Each of us will have to give a personal account to God.* Think about the implications of that. One day God will compare how much time and energy we spent on ourselves compared with what we invested in serving others. At that point, all our excuses for self-centeredness will sound hollow: ‘I was too busy’ or ‘I had my own goals’ or ‘I was preoccupied with working, having fun, or preparing for retirement.’ To all excuses God will respond, ‘Sorry, wrong answer. I created, saved, and called you and commanded you to live a life of service. *What part* did you not understand?’ The Bible warns unbelievers, *He will pour out his anger and wrath on those who live for themselves,* but for Christians it will mean a loss of eternal rewards.” (pp. 231-232)

Now I know I am in big trouble. As a matter of fact, I am doomed. Every minute of every day, according to this book, I am being tested to see if I measure up. I might as well give up right now because there is no way that I can possibly jump over all of these hurdles. The only way out for me is if God is willing to forgive me when I stumble, but that is not what I am told by Rick Warren. As a matter of fact, I’m told just the opposite. If I don’t do all of these things to God’s satisfaction, I will lose eternal rewards. This is not the God or the good news of the Gospel that I know.

I am comforted by knowing that my salvation was already secured by Jesus Christ, not by anything that I do. God knows my imperfections and yet forgives me because of the sacrifice that Christ made for me through his death for my sins. The hope, security, joy and freedom I feel because of Christ’s resurrection create in me a desire to do good works, not as a prerequisite to earn my rewards in heaven, but as a consequence of the unconditional, unending, all-encompassing love and unearned grace and mercy that God extends to me. And I want others to know and experience the joy and contentment that this type of love and mercy brings into your life.

It may appear to readers that Rick Warren is an authority because he includes 1,000 Scripture quotes in his book from fifteen different Bible translations. Indeed, this proof of authenticity is quoted by all of the media when referring to this book. By his own admission, however, Warren states that he “...deliberately used paraphrases in order to help you see God’s truth in new, *fresh* ways,” and that “I haven’t always quoted the *entire* verse, but rather focused on the phrase that was appropriate” (p.325).

Truth is truth, and we shouldn't have to see it in any way other than it was originally intended in the Scripture. Paraphrasing allows Rick Warren to modify the truth by using whatever translation and wording support the point he is trying to make. This is commonly referred to as proof-texting. And when I looked up several of the verses he cited, the phrases are indeed taken out of context and their real meaning is lost.

I am also concerned that there is very little mention anywhere in *The Purpose Driven Life* of the important role that the Holy Spirit plays in my life. It appears as if everything is up to me by the choices *I* make, and that God is just sitting there waiting for *me* to act:

“You are as close to God as you choose to be.....I must choose to be honest with God.....I must choose to obey God in faith.....I must choose to value what God values.....I must desire friendship with God more than anything else.” (pp. 92-97)

“Nothing shapes your life more than the commitments you choose to make. Your commitments can develop you or they can destroy you, but either way, they will define you.....every choice has eternal consequences, so you had better choose wisely.” (p. 180)

“The truth is - you are as close to God *as you choose to be*. Intimate friendship with God is a choice, not an accident. You must intentionally seek it.” (p.98)

I do not believe that my intimate friendship with God is an accident by any means. I believe that it is the Holy Spirit that moves me into a closer relationship with the Lord, the Holy Spirit that gives me the gift of faith, the Holy Spirit that works to increase that faith within me and directs me towards certain choices.

Without a doubt, aside from the description of God's love as conditional, the most damaging and dangerous aspect of this book is the rigid position presented regarding suffering and forgiveness. It is dangerous specifically for anyone who is, or who ever has been, a victim of abuse. Warren states, unequivocally:

“It is a sacrifice to patiently absorb the anger of others, especially if it's unfounded. But remember, this is what Jesus did for you. He endured unfounded, malicious anger in order to save you: ‘*Christ did not indulge his own feelings.....as scripture says: The insults of those who insult you fall on me.*’ ” (p. 156)

For a victim of abuse this is a horrendous suggestion and in some cases this directive could turn into a death sentence. At the very least it contributes to enabling abusive situations to perpetuate by placing the spiritual burden on the victim to endure the abuse. The implication is that a person should stay and take abuse specifically because this is what Christ did for us, that they should put their own feelings aside, it is their cross to bear, and if a person doesn't want to do that, then they are not being a good Christian. We should emulate the manner in

which Christ lived, not his suffering during his crucifixion or his death. He took on our pain to identify with us, and Jesus, through his death, served the specific purpose of being a substitute for all of us.

When abuse is occurring, the responsibility needs to be placed on the abuser to *stop* the abuse, to be accountable for controlling his actions. Abuse should not be endured by the victim, but brought to light so that it can come to an end. Warren extends spiritual guilt for victims even further, however, when he pronounces:

“God expects us to give our lives for each other. Many Christians who know John 3:16 are unaware of 1 John 3:16: *‘Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.’* This is the kind of sacrificial love God expects you to show to other believers.” (pp. 133-134)

Many abuse victims harbor tremendous guilt for not protecting others in their family involved in the abusive situations, whether it is siblings, or children, or the parent being abused. These types of statements can only lead to tremendous unearned guilt and a sense of spiritual failure for victims who believe that they are not living up to God’s expectations.

Similarly, forgiveness is a very difficult issue for abuse victims. Sometimes it can take a lifetime to forgive, if at all. It is something that each individual needs to work through in his or her own time. Failure by abuse victims to forgive within a certain timeframe does not mean that they have failed as Christians, and the judgment of others in regard to this only adds an unnecessary burden of guilt on them. But when it comes to forgiveness, Rick Warren is adamant:

“Forgiveness must be immediate, whether or not a person asks for it. Trust must be rebuilt over time. Trust requires a track record. If someone hurts you repeatedly, you are commanded by God to forgive them instantly, but you are not expected to trust them immediately, and you are not expected to allow them to continue to hurt you.” (p. 143)

Although he recognizes that victims should not allow abusers to continue to harm them, Warren presents forgiveness as an instantaneous, absolute requirement of God. By doing this he cheapens the concept, renders it meaningless, and engenders feelings of guilt and spiritual failure in those who are unable to do so.

Forgiveness is a process, and if people feel that it is necessary to forgive immediately to remain in God’s good graces, they will say the words, but then is it real forgiveness? Forgiveness, in many situations, especially abusive ones, takes time and a nonjudgmental atmosphere to be sincerely felt by the victim and offered to the abuser. Demanding it only succeeds in creating an atmosphere of pressure and guilt and false forgiveness. Furthermore, Rick Warren’s advice regarding reconciliation is very dangerous for the abuse victim:

“Emphasize reconciliation, not resolution. It is unrealistic to expect everyone to agree about everything. Reconciliation focuses on the relationship, while resolution focuses on the problem. When we focus on reconciliation, the problem loses significance and often becomes irrelevant. We can reestablish a relationship even when we are unable to resolve our differences.” (p.158)

In abusive situations, the problem, the abuse, *is* the most important thing and the parties involved need to deal with it first and foremost. Abuse never becomes irrelevant and if left unresolved, it usually increases in severity and significance. There needs to be repentance and a change in behavior on the part of the abuser prior to reconciliation. A formerly abusive relationship should not be reestablished until and unless the abuser deals with the problem. Otherwise, with a mandate like the one stated above, the guilt and responsibility fall entirely on the shoulders of the victim and the cycle of abuse will, in all probability, continue.

All things considered, if I try to live my life according to the dictates of this book, I might succeed in having a purposeful life as defined by Rick Warren. But I also know that I will be constantly worried that I am not “good enough,” that I am not “doing it the right way,” that I am making the “wrong” choice and that God is going to reject me if I don’t satisfy all of his demands.

I prefer to believe that God wants me to lead a joyful life, one where I am not constantly looking over my shoulder. I am convinced that one of the reasons he brought me into this world is to enjoy the incredible beauty of his creation, and that he is going to forgive me no matter how many times I slip up, and that I can feel free to do good works in his name because my place in eternity has already been bought and paid for by Christ.

There are some things in life, I believe, that should remain a mystery. In today’s society, however, people want to know everything, to be privy to all of God’s secrets. Many expectant parents want to know the sex of their child before it is born so they can plan accordingly. There has been a resurgence in the media and fascination with people who claim to be able to talk to those who have “crossed over” to the other side of life into death. And now, people want an immediate cookbook recipe to follow so they can know with certainty what God’s purpose is for their lives so that they can “get it all right” and thereby receive the greatest heavenly rewards possible. Surely, if we were all in Eden today, people would be clamoring to eat the fruit.

If I had to define it, and I am not sure I should have to, I believe that I have one purpose and that is to be a vessel to carry Christ’s light into this world of darkness. And I am greatly saddened when a fellow Christian makes pronouncements like the following:

“This is your commission from Jesus, and it is not optional. These words of Jesus are not the *Great Suggestion*. If you are a part of God’s family, your mission is mandatory. To ignore it would be disobedience. You may have been unaware

that God holds you responsible for the unbelievers who live around you.....If you fail to fulfill your God-given mission on earth, you will have wasted the life God gave you.” (p. 283, p. 285)

No one, absolutely no one on this earth has the right to pass judgment on the value of my life because *no one* knows what God’s ultimate purpose for my life is. Maybe for some people what they accomplish during this life is not the most important thing or their reason for being. I have experienced the deaths of a brother and a sister-in-law at ages that we would all consider quite premature. They were Christians, but not evangelists. Were their lives wasted? Their deaths were seemingly senseless. Yet I learned more about life and love from their deaths than I have learned by any other means. Perhaps their real purpose was to die in order to teach others. And if I’m unsure about that, all I have to do is look to Christ. His ultimate purpose wasn’t to live for us, but to die for us.

Maybe I’ve got it all wrong. But then again, maybe I don’t. Only God knows for sure, so I’m not going to spend my days worrying about my purpose in life or whether or not I am fulfilling it properly. I’m just going to make myself available to God and trust that he will make his Gospel light shine through me for whatever purpose he has for me.