

Book REVIEW

Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life* (Zondervan, 2002)
ISBN 0310205719

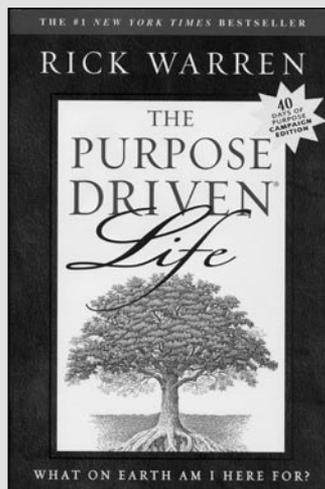
—Reviewed by Ralph D. Winter

There must be something to it. I sincerely doubt that in the history of the USA any one local church has had the influence on as many other churches as has the (Southern Baptist) Saddleback congregation in Lake Forest, California. It is said that 80,000 other congregations of many denominations are close followers. A million copies of an earlier book, *The Purpose Driven Church* were sold (in 20 languages).

Now, a follow-through sequel is *The Purpose Driven Life*. It has been on the best seller list every week for more than a year and has outsold both *Harry Potter* and *Left Behind* books.

To me this book is an artistic and spiritual delight, carefully and joyfully crafted with true wisdom on every page. It is an amazing but unlikely work of art to derive from the life of a super-busy pastor of a 22,000 member congregation. Rick Warren is a real marvel.

But I am also deeply disappointed. I am much more saddened, of course, than I would be if this book were not so spectacularly successful and widely used. Multiplied thousands will understandably take it to be virtually an authoritative definition of Christianity. And it is good as far as it goes.



But it seems to be formed to a great extent—and this is probably understandable—from the pervasive status quo of Evangelical Christianity today which has become mainly a part-time, after-hours activity.

To be sure, it talks of the holiness of everyday life, but nowhere seriously addresses the profound tensions, moral and spiritual, of the laity in their 40-hour work week, e.g. what ethical challenges arise for a marketing director who will inevitably be tempted to edge buyers in the direction of buying his company's

product over another, or an accountant who will inevitably be pressured to make things look better than they are, or an attorney who may feel he or she must convince a jury of a certain flawed perspective of things that have happened, or even a worker who may or may not ever wonder if his job represents the most significant contribution to society which

could be secured (rather than the highest paying job available).

A thousand similar questions could arrestingly be asked. This is why a hundred years ago Charles Sheldon's *In His Steps* outsold all other religious books beyond the Bible itself. (Sold more than *The Purpose Driven Life*).

Witnessing on the job is not the only concern for someone who would walk in the steps of Christ.

The job itself must be seen as a holy calling, one in which remuneration is secondary to a purpose-driven “good work” which men may see and glorify our Father in heaven (Matt 5:16).

When in seminary in 1946 I ran across a sermon by John Cotton in New England back in the 1600s. His title was “The Christian's Calling” and he made no reference whatsoever to after-hours activity. In those days leisure time was almost non-existent due to the harsh conditions of mere survival. That is, in the wilderness hewing out their survival required “every man to do his duty,” so to speak, not just to seek any job that suited their fancy or paid a high salary. This is why a wise pastor back then could preach seriously about the cruciality to the kingdom of lay people's mainstream work not just their after-hours work in the life of the local church.

Harvard's famous historian of America, Perry Miller, commenting on this sermon of John Cotton, says,

It is a logical consequence of Puritan theology: man is put into this world, not to spend his life in profitless singing of hymns or in unfruitful monastic contemplation, but to do what the world requires, according to its terms. He must raise children, he must work at his calling. No activity is outside the holy purpose of the overarching covenant. Yet the Christian works not for the gain that may (or may not) result from his labor, but for the glory of God. (Miller:173)

The sermon itself says,

A Christian would no sooner have his sin pardoned than his estate [vocation] to be settled in some good calling. (173).

This, however, is not the tone of Warren's book. Warren is proud to report (p. 244) that 7,000 of his members are already "using their abilities in ministry at Saddleback church."

On pages 242 and 243 he gives a long list of vocational skills, and yet on pages 243 and 244 he clearly sees them as contributing to the church (not the world).

True, there are passing references which would align him with John Cotton, such as "Every activity can be transformed into an act of worship when you do it for the praise, glory, and pleasure of God ... a lifestyle of worship" (p. 67). And, "You can wash dishes, repair a machine, sell a product, write a computer program, grow a crop, and raise a family for the glory of God" (p. 74). But as the book unfolds it becomes clear that he is thinking primarily about such activities mainly in the context of the church, devoted to the work of the local church.

He even states,

You are going to give your life for something. What will it be—a career, a sport, a hobby, fame, wealth? None of these will have lasting significance. Service is the pathway to real significance. It is through ministry that we discover the meaning for our lives. (p. 232)

He could have said that *your career could be your ministry* but that is precisely what he does not say. It is as though he conceives of ministry as being solely what is done in the church in its local or national or global outreach. It is as though he conceives of all lay skills as significant only if they are assisting religious professionals in pastoring or missionary work.

I do not doubt that Saddleback church needs and properly uses the part time work of 7,000 of its 22,000 members,

Providing every kind of service you could imagine: repairing donated cars to be given to the

needy; finding the best deal for church purchases; landscaping; organizing files; designing art, programs, and buildings; providing health care; preparing meals; composing songs; teaching music; writing grant proposals; coaching teams; doing research for sermons or translating them; and hundreds of other specialized tasks. New members are told, "Whatever you're good at, you should be doing for your church."

How I wish he might have added, "Whatever you're good at in the work place, do also to the glory of God in the work place." Otherwise it is possible that followers of Christ will serve Him in ministry in the local church but take none of His purposes into the work place where the massive corruption and deception and greed of this world is perennially manifest, where all too often whatever serves the bottom line is the default definition of ethical behavior. To be the salt of the earth is different from being the icing on the cake.

How many missionaries on first arrival on the field have readily assumed that, if only they can convey to the people the truths of the saving blood of Christ then, corruption, bribery, cheating, envy, hostility, brutality will automatically cease. There is a connection. I am sure that once a person begins serving a living Lord rather than his own ends, honesty tends to replace deception—lies usually are self-serving. But all this needs to be spelled out not taken for granted. The latter portions of Paul's epistles surely do not take for granted the unguided transformation of human character and behavior of which he speaks in such detail.

I have no doubt that Warren could write another book, *The Purpose Driven Vocation*, in which he would address the major involvement of his people—the eight-hour day. This ultimately is the arena in which the church stands or falls,

the world in which what we do glorifies our Father in heaven and gives power and credibility to our evangelism. Isn't it a tragedy that the world is as suspicious of the morality and ethics of Christian leaders as they are of non-believing business and political leaders? Is this in part because being a Christian has come to be defined widely among us as largely what we do after-hours and in and for the church?