

The Purpose Driven Life

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Rick Warren has sold fifteen million copies of his book *The Purpose Driven Life*. Because it is one of the best-selling books in United States publishing history, I think we should know a little about it. Because Rick Warren has been called to the White House to meet with President Bush and the First Lady and because Warren has been called America's most influential pastor, it is important that we know a little about him.

In 1980 after graduating from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary the Rev. Rick Warren moved to one of the fastest growing areas of Southern California. There he founded a southern Baptist congregation he called Saddleback Valley Church in Lake Forest, about 45 miles south of Los Angeles. The first service held in a rented hall had about 200 people in attendance, but growth was rapid.

I first heard about Saddleback in the mid-1980s. It was described as a fast-growing mega church that did not have a building. Many growing churches grow to the size of their parking lots, or their sanctuary spaces, or their religious education spaces, and then stop growing. Rick Warren's approach was to rent a grade school to hold services. When the grade school was full, they moved to a high school. When the high school was full, they rented space in a junior college. They only built when they had thousands of members. Today they hold six worship services every weekend. Average attendance is more than 18,000.

This week I bought and I read the best seller by this popular minister. For me the key to understanding *The Purpose Driven Life* is on page 287. Rev. Warren writes:

My father was a minister for over fifty years, serving mostly in small, rural churches. He was a simple preacher, but he was a man with a mission. His favorite activity was taking teams of volunteers overseas to build church buildings for small congregations. In his lifetime, Dad built over 150 churches around the world.

In 1999, [Warren continued] my father died of cancer. In the final week of his life the disease kept him awake in a semi-conscious state nearly twenty-four hours a day. As he dreamed, he'd talk out loud about what he was dreaming. Sitting by his bedside, I learned a lot about my dad by just listening to his dreams. He relived one church building project after another.

One night near the end, [Rick Warren wrote] while my wife, my niece, and I were

by his side, Dad suddenly became very active and tried to get out of bed. Of course, he was too weak, and my wife insisted he lay back down. But he persisted in trying to get out of bed, so my wife finally asked, “Jimmy, what are you trying to do?” He replied, “Got to save one more for Jesus! Got to save one more for Jesus! Got to save one more for Jesus!” He began to repeat that phrase over and over.

During the next hour, he said the phrase probably a hundred times. “Got to save one more for Jesus!” As I sat by his bed with tears flowing down my cheeks, I bowed my head to thank God for my Dad’s faith. At that moment Dad reached out and placed his frail hand on my head and said, as if commissioning me, “Save one more for Jesus! Save one more for Jesus!” [Warren concluded by saying] I intend for that to be the theme of the rest of my life.

This is Rick Warren’s “Purpose Driven Life”—he has dedicated his life to activities that would make his father proud. He wants all of us to receive Jesus as our Lord and Savior and then to go out and bring others to Jesus. In other words, Rick Warren wants us all to be like his earthly father. He thinks all of us should be just like him in copying his Dad.

In my experience this is a common way that we humans set our purpose in life. I believe that Rick Warren’s message resonates with millions of people because their parents taught them the same religious view that Warren’s parents taught him. In the United States today millions of adults hold theological views similar to those of Rick Warren. Like him the parents of these millions of people taught their children that the Bible is the word of God; that Jesus died for our sins; that if we accept Jesus as our Lord and Savior we will go to heaven; that some day Jesus will return to earth; and that our task is to bring people to Jesus. If we do not believe this we will go to hell. According to this view most Unitarian Universalists will go to hell.

Now I should say that in some ways I am no different from Rick Warren. I entered the ministry in part because I wanted to please my father and my mother. My parents were active members in the Unitarian Church so I became a Unitarian Universalist minister. My father was a conscientious objector during World War II, and I was a conscientious objector during the Vietnam war. My parents views have, to a large degree, driven the purpose of my life.

Of course, not everyone is like Rick Warren or me, finding a purpose by trying to please our parents. Sometimes people completely reject their mother or their father or reject both parents. You may have gotten your driving purpose from an older brother or sister or a teacher or your boss at one of your first jobs.

When I am trying to get to know another person, I sometimes ask them about their motivations.

Why did you pick this career?

What led you to be a leader in the Boy Scouts?

Why did you become a doctor?

What motivated you to get involved in politics?
Why did you become active in this church?

I am looking for the motivations behind the actions. Often the answer is tied to a parent or a teacher or a friend. Part of my motivation is to learn more about another person. But I also hope that others will learn more about themselves as they form answers to my questions.

On the one hand, living our lives to please our parents, or our teachers, or our mentors can be satisfying emotionally and it can result in productive lives. On the other hand, realizing that we are doing something primarily because we want to please others, can be a liberating experience. We can look a new at our lives and ask ourselves is this really what I want to be doing?

Rick Warren does not appear to encourage self reflection. He tells his readers “We ask self-centered questions like ‘What do I want to be? What should I do with my life? What are my goals, my ambitions, my dreams for the future? But,” he says, “you won’t discover your life’s meaning by looking within yourself.”

He writes “Do not ask yourself what you want out of your life, ask yourself what God wants out of your life.” The title of one of his chapters is: “You Were Planned for God’s Pleasure.” I think when Warren uses the word God he is really talking about his own earthly father. He is doing work that his Dad would be proud to see him do.

Self-awareness can be scary. If we realize that we are driven to please others such as our parents, it opens the possibility that we might freely choose to do something else with our lives. This freedom can be frightening. However I believe that if each generation of the human race is to make progress, if we are to get a little closer to living in harmony with the earth, a little closer to living in peace with each other, then we need to use our reason to evaluate our parent’s lives, try to learn from their mistakes, and try do a little better then they did.

Although I do not see evidence of this self reflection in the book *The Purpose Driven Life*, I do see signs of hope in an article about Rick Warren in this week’s *Time* magazine. Warren may be going beyond the mission of simply converting people. *Time* says that Warren is giving 90% of his book royalties to the church and to a charitable foundation that he and his wife established to supplement the church’s mission projects. The mission projects include fighting poverty, illiteracy, and disease, especially AIDS in the United States and abroad. According to *Time*, Warren wants each of Saddleback church’s 2,000 small groups to adopt a village in a developing country, make mission trips there and send educational and medical supplies along with spiritual and financial support. The magazine quotes Warren as saying “I think God gets the most glory when you tackle the biggest problems. So I’ve decided to use my influence to help the poor and oppressed, and I’ll spend the rest of my life doing that.”

This sounds good. If Rick Warren uses his skills as a speaker, a writer and an organizer to lead people to fight poverty, illiteracy and disease he has my thanks and my support.

Personally I believe the purpose of the human race is first to survive and second to gain knowledge. I base my belief not on the Bible or on my parents, but on the story of evolution. Life has slowly evolved from one celled animals to our current wonderful brains. I think God has designed our brains so we can build microscopes and telescopes. I think the spirit of life designed our brains to create the sciences of biology and physics. I think the creative life force designed us so that each generation can learn more about the nature of the universe. That is our purpose as human beings.

Of course, most of us are not directly engaged in cutting edge science research. But all of us can support and encourage such research. At its best, religion's role is to hold researchers to ethical standards so that the dignity of life is held in high respect as we seek more knowledge. And at its best science is replacing theology as it makes discoveries about the beginning of the universe and the beginnings of life.

Rick Warren and millions of others are holding onto an old view of the universe taught to them by their parents. The old view does not take account of the new discoveries made in the past 200 years. They defend the theological truth of yesterday as an unchangeable message and fail to learn from newly discovered truths. They think that those who do not share their religious views, which includes most Unitarians and Universalists, are going to roast in hell.

Still, if Rick Warren and his followers help to fight poverty, illiteracy and disease, they will be making an important contribution to the human race. I think the purpose of the human race is to survive and gain knowledge. Fighting poverty and disease will help us survive. Fighting illiteracy will help us gain knowledge. If Rick Warren does this, he has my thanks. And if there is a heaven, I look forward to seeing him there, along with all of you.

