

10 SUGGESTIONS ON HOW TO STUDY RICK WARREN'S BOOKS¹

The popularity of Rick Warren and his evangelistic methods is phenomenal. His books offer many valuable suggestions and describe practical experiences that can be really beneficial to the life of the church. At the same time they are uncritically interwoven with principles taken over from business, marketing and ego-psychology that make the rightness of these methods in the church questionable. The following hints and suggestions have been prepared for the students of theology to help them critically analyse *Purpose Driven* methods of Rick Warren in the life both of an individual and of the church.

1. THE BIBLE

Read the Bible as a whole – not just as a selection of quotations that you find in Rick Warren's books. Do not be too lazy *always* to look up his quotations in your Bible and to read them in their original context. If Warren's use of the quotations does not agree with the use in their original context, the biblical text may have been abused. (Also, the versions of the Bible used by Warren often do not translate the original text but paraphrase it in order to make it palatable to the plausibility of modern man.)

Supporting theological argument by quotations from the Bible is always a very demanding procedure and one must be faithful to the biblical text in its original context. The Augustinian principle of *analogia fidei* (analogy of faith) and the Reformation requirement of *explaining Scripture by Scripture* must be unconditionally obeyed if the result is not to be something different from Christian theology.

That is why you must think independently and inquire (and this not only when you study Warren's books) whether things are "really so" according to the Bible.

2. THEOLOGY

Never ignore Systematic Theology. Warren skips some of the fundamental articles of Christian Dogmatics that do not fit into his picture of God as some kind of "Heavenly Smiley". This kind of God may be attractive, but the big question is whether he is real. (To say that God was there "*smiling* at your birth" can be affirmed only if God smiles at the birth of every baby. Then, it seems that there would be some difficulty in reconciling this with what Jesus said about Judas: "It would be better for him if he had not been born." Mk 14:21 NASB²). To avoid difficult questions is an easy way out but usually it does not lead to good theology.

Naturally, church newcomers are not ready to digest heavy theological arguments, but we should not act like the difficult questions do not exist. Even modern man needs what the Bible traditionally terms *humility*. And there are few things that so humble the human intellect as does the transcendence of God. But you find almost nothing about this in Warren's books.

3. ANTHROPOCENTRISM

Acquaint yourself with the basic tenets of philosophical Humanism³ whose attention is centered on Man and his earthly well-being. Of course, Warren does not profess the faith of humanistic atheism, naturalism or secularism, but humanistic anthropocentrism belongs to the basic methods of his work. Although his book *The Purpose Driven Life* begins with a liberating "It's not about you", the book is built on the principles of ego-theology *God for myself*. Take notice that the motives and arguments for worshipping God or serving others are always found in the *fulfillment of the self*.

One of the critical questions that must be asked about every gospel message is: What is in its center – is it Christ and his Cross? (Apostle Paul gives this characteristics of his preaching: "...I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified." 1 Cor 2:2). The work of Christ is *for* man but not *according to the will of man*. It was done according to the will of God ("...Jesus Christ who gave Himself for our sins so that He might rescue us from this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father" Gal 1:3b-4). To present the gospel as the fulfilment of human aspirations through the discovery of the *real self* is an anthropocentric misuse of the gospel for the build-up of one's ego.

¹ This was written for the students of theology in Slovakia at the time when two Warren's books were available in Slovak. (*The Purpose Driven Life* and *The Purpose Driven Church*)

² *New American Standard Bible*. All Bible quotations are from NASB, Copyright © The Lockman Foundation 1995.

³ Eg: http://www.humanists.org/hum_lamont.htm

4. ECCLESIOCENTRISM

Think critically and ask why it is that the local church, the quality of fellowship, personal growth and development of church workers and innovation of evangelistic methods are in the center of Warren's attention. Rather than being the living Lord of the Church, it appears that Jesus Christ is here only a sort of perfect example of how to use the *Church Growth* techniques. He is not looked at as someone who should be regularly contacted to ascertain his will. Organizing the life of the local church according to the *Purpose Driven* principles makes people proud of the trade mark rather than attentive to the voice of the Holy Spirit.

The high position of the Church in the plan of God is a wonderful manifestation of the mercy of God. Christ gave his life for the Church. But this does not mean that *the Church* will put herself in the center of attention in some ecclesiastical narcissism. Christ, his person, his work, and his action in the believer must always be in the center of Church attention.

5. PSYCHOLOGY

Study and learn at least the basic aims and methods of secular self-help psychology. You have to be able to distinguish them from the biblical ideas in Warren's methods and arguments. Despite the fact that Warren expressly denies using the principles of contemporary pop-psychology, his books are quite soaked with them. If you read just a little about the importance of knowing the purpose in life in Logotherapy⁴ you will find out that talk about *purpose* has great motivational power even without any Christian content in it.⁵ A theologian has to ask to what degree the message about *purpose* is the motivating force to repent and be born again and is not just about exchanging old habits for new ones in a new and very comfortable and accommodating environment that does not put any really hard demands on me.

For a church worker it is important to know psychology (especially in pastoral care) and a theologian must not ignore it. However, the problem emerges when the methods of psychology replace the Holy Spirit.

6. MARKETING THE GOSPEL

You will need to know something about the motivational techniques of Peter Drucker (1909-2005) with whom Warren, according to his own words, was regularly conferring for twenty years. No wonder that one of the experts on business commented on Warren's book: "This is one of the greatest entrepreneurial books I've ever read, and if you merely substitute the word 'business' for 'church', it's just a terrific guide that can be taken to a secular and business audience."⁶

Evangelistic methods that adapt the church to a narrowly defined target group to be reached are in conflict with Jesus' parables of the sower (who sows in all kinds of soil) or of the fishing net (that catches all sorts of fish). To adjust one's lifestyle to the demands of evangelism (Says Paul: "...I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some." 1 Cor 9:22) does not mean, that we make the people outside the church the highest norm for the life of the church.

Management and marketing theories can be very helpful in the life of the church. But certainly not in such a way that the church will produce "*a message rooted in the feelings of ones customers*".⁷ In the first place the gospel creates the desire for righteousness and only then fulfils it, because it cannot count on natural human longings as Drucker would like to have it.

7. CALIFORNIAN CULTURE

In your theology do not put the quality of church environment or the technical equipment in the center of attention as if this were the ultimate precondition for successful evangelism. If you do not live in California and you are not from Saddleback (the "Saddleback Sam") what to do with your life to finally give it some purpose will most likely not be your biggest problem. Frankl pointed out that "as the *struggle for survival* has subsided, the question has emerged: *survival for what?*"⁸ While the struggle for physical survival in USA may have subsided in comparison with the rest of the world, this is far from being true about the other parts of the world.

⁴ Founded by Viktor E. FRANKL (1905-1997).

⁵ FRANKL said that man can find purpose irrespective of whether he is or is not religious.

⁶ http://aarontay90.blogspot.com/2007_01_01_archive.html

⁷ Peter Drucker said: "Create a brand that is rooted in the feelings of ones customers".

(http://www.acleareye.com/sandbox_wisdom/2005/01/peter_drucker_o.html)

⁸ FRANKL, V.E. *The Unheard Cry for Meaning*.

Creating an environment that is culturally perceptive to newcomers in the church is important. Nevertheless, this must not lead to a theological evacuation of the message and a loss of Christian freedom.

8. TOTALITARIANISM OR THE KINGDOM OF GOD?

In the education of new converts, take care not to replace the guidance of the Holy Spirit with Warren's precepts or church leaders' decisions. The *purpose driven* church requires that all its members be committed to the arbitrarily selected "five purposes of the church" (worship, evangelism, fellowship, discipleship, and service). There is a similar totalitarian effect in the advice to require each member of your church to sign a pledge to protect the unity of the church fellowship. When unity becomes untouchable truth is the usual victim.

Study the work of the Holy Spirit in the history of the evangelical revivals. You will find out that the Kingdom of God cannot be squeezed into applying any given number of purposes. Do not give up your longing for real spiritual revival and replace it by successful gospel-marketing in a totally managed church.

9. SUCCESS

Compare the attractiveness of Jesus and the New Testament church with the attraction of the *purpose driven* church. Jesus surely was attracting crowds – but only while he was healing and feeding them. When he began teaching them the terms of followership, his popularity dropped to zero. All the so called *seeker sensitive* churches stress the attractiveness of the church and numerical success at the expense of seeing Christianity as "the savour of death" (The apostle writes: "...For we are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to the one an aroma from death to death, to the other an aroma from life to life..." 2 Cor 2:15-16).

Warren says that his critics are motivated by jealousy of his success. If evangelistic success is identified with the ability to attract crowds, Warren is very successful. But it is not necessary to go to great lengths to prove that the number of converts is not the only dimension of success in following Christ. After all, this is what Warren himself is underlining.

10. THE CLEAR PURPOSE

Remember that a clear purpose may be exciting and a great purpose may be greatly exciting. But without further analysis, excitement does not prove that it is coming from the Holy Spirit.⁹ Its origin may be also in the attractive populist theology that easily fills the pews of the church. God's purpose for man was put before us in the Decalogue (the Ten Commandments), but the Letter to the Romans says that this purpose simply cannot be reached "in the flesh" – ie. without the power of the Holy Spirit. (It is succinctly put in Rom 8:9 – "However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him." – but the problem is treated fully in Romans chapters 6-9). If you are *driven* by a biblical *purpose* but you do not know where to get the power to sustain it, you may end up crying "Wretched man that I am!" (Rom 7:24).

One final remark: everyone who believes the Bible knows that God's purpose in creating mankind was to worship the Creator. But this does not mean, that it is always clear in the life of a Christian what God's purpose is for his or her life. Life with a clear purpose quite often walks on the dimly lit paths.

Warren may complain that pioneers are always under attack – but in the same way populists never lack followers. So, study and think!

Pavel Hanes

⁹ It is worth noticing how little Warren's books say about the experience of the Christian with the Holy Spirit.