

HERBERT EDGAR DOUGLASS

TRUTH *Matters*



An analysis of the *Purpose Driven Life* movement

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ONE

The Purpose Driven Life Phenomenon

Who is Rick Warren?

By all accounts, Rick Warren is a modern phenomenon. No appearances on Oprah's world stage,¹ no financial or sexual scandals that have catapulted other well-known religious leaders to the front page or evening news programs, no news conferences on the Supreme Court steps, not even his own TV or radio programs. For many he is a lovable, unpretentious teddy bear with a "global target."²

Warren and his wife, Kay, with their three children, live in a home similar to his church members' and drive their own four-year-old Ford SUV.³ Just a fun-loving man without a boat, private plane, or beach house. But he was featured on the cover of *Time* magazine (February 7, 2005) and listed in its cover story as one of the twenty-five most influential evangelicals for 2005! Weeks later (April 18, 2005), *Time* included Warren as one of the hundred most influential persons in the world! Some meteoric trajectory for a person only fifty-one years old and with only twenty-five years of professional life behind him!

Warren was among a select panel of advisers that President George W.

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1. However, during the week of October 3–7, 2005, Rick Warren appeared on Oprah Winfrey's TV program promoting both *The Purpose Driven Life* and Ashley Smith's new book on how *The Purpose Driven Life* helped her to cope with the murderer in her home. Since his much-chronicled trips to Africa and after announcing his P.E.A.C.E. Plan, Warren seems to be everywhere—on radio, on TV, and in various news magazines.
 2. "I've got a target. It's called the globe. The whole Gospel for the whole world."—*USA Today* 7/21/2003.
 3. As of December 2005.

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Bush consulted for “discussion and prayer” as he prepared his speech commemorating the first anniversary of September 11 in New York and Washington.

Born in 1954, Warren has been pastor of Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, southern Orange County, California, since 1980. He earned his master of divinity degree from Southwestern Theological Seminary and his doctor of ministry degree from Fuller Theological Seminary. Since 1980, he has been the chief architect of the Purpose Driven ministry movement.

During his last year in seminary, he and Kay drove west to visit Robert Schuller’s Institute for Church Growth. “We had a very stony ride out to the conference,” Warren says, because such nontraditional ministry scared her to death. Schuller, though, won them over, “We were captivated by his positive appeal to nonbelievers. I never looked back.”⁴

On graduation from seminary, Warren was offered the pulpit of a five thousand-member Texas church, but he had larger plans in mind! He and Kay took off for Southern California with no money, just a dream.

On April 6, 1980, twenty-six-year-old Warren spoke to 205 strangers who had responded to his advertisement for an Easter Service at Laguna Hills High School and announced his dream of building a church with twenty thousand members on fifty acres of land, sending out hundreds of career missionaries, and starting at least one daughter church a year. Boldly, he declared, “I stand before you today and state in confident assurance that these dreams will become reality. Why? Because they are inspired by God!”⁵

On April 17, 2005, at Angel Stadium, home of the Angels baseball team, Warren and his Saddleback Church celebrated their twenty-fifth anniversary. Thirty thousand people listened to Warren announce a new worldwide spiritual awakening for the twenty-first century. And his dream continues to grow. His P.E.A.C.E. Plan, he believes, will mobilize one billion foot soldiers for the Christian church in missions by 2020.

Warren is on a roll. Since 1980, more than four hundred thousand pastors and leaders in 162 countries have been trained in Purpose-Driven seminars; more than forty thousand churches in 117 countries on all seven continents are in his global network.⁶ His email newsletter,

4. Tim Stafford, “A Regular Purpose-Driven Guy,” *Christianity Today*, November 18, 2002. See chapter 11 for Warren’s disclaimers that Robert Schuller was his mentor or that Warren modeled his ministry after Schuller.

5. Ibid. See also “Forty Days of Purpose”/Rick Warren Biography (<www.ynew.org/purpose/boo.html>).

6. <www.pastors.com/aboutus/> 10/22/04.

Ministry Toolbox, reaches more than eighty-five thousand church leaders!⁷ More than thirty thousand churches around the world have completed his Forty-Day study plan. When six hundred senior pastors were asked to name the people they thought had the greatest influence on church affairs in the United States, Warren came in second only to Billy Graham.⁸

More than eighty thousand names are on Saddleback's church roll. Church staff members number more than 300 full- and part-time workers while the Purpose Driven Ministries has 250 staff members. Saddleback Church launches a daughter church annually. It expects to reach a weekly attendance of thirty thousand while not building a worship center larger than its current three-thousand-seat auditorium. How is that done? The church is like a cineplex with multiple smaller venues using a videotaped sermon and live music in different styles to please as many people as possible. One is never late because another service is about to begin somewhere in the complex.

Warren speaks of his training of these four hundred thousand pastors as his "stealth strategy." He intends to change the world—not through himself on TV or radio—but through pastors. "We train more pastors than all the seminaries combined,"⁹ he says.

More than twelve thousand churches from all fifty states and nineteen countries have reported that these Purpose-Driven seminars were the most transforming event in their congregation's history.

Forbes magazine declared that "were it a business, Saddleback church would be compared with Dell, Google or Starbucks."¹⁰

Warren pictures the pastor as a team player who uses as many colleagues as possible. His leadership at Saddleback reflects this philosophy. For example, during the seven months he was writing *The Purpose Driven Life (PDL)*, he preached only Christmas and Easter services.

Warren packs *PDL* with lists and exhortations, rarely with anecdotes. His superb sense of organization and pithy admonitions grows out of his self-awareness: "I was just wired by God to see how things relate to each other. I'm a synthesizer and systematizer."¹¹ Anyone who listens to his

7. Richard Abanes, *Rick Warren and the Purpose That Drives Him* (Eugene, Ore.: Harvest House Publishers, 2005), 8.

8. *Time*, February 7, 2005.

9. Stafford, op. cit.

10. February, 2, 2004.

11. *USA Today*, 7/21/2003.

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sermons or to his lectures at the Purpose-Driven seminars knows exactly what I mean.

Warren compares his “Purpose-Driven paradigm” as the Intel chip and the Windows system for the Christian church in the twenty-first century.¹²

How do people recognize him? In his pulpit he often wears a Hawaiian-style shirt, with deck shoes and without socks. Interestingly, though, when he was photographed with President Bush, he wore his business suit with tie. And on Neil Cavuto’s TV news show (June 23, 2005), when Rick Warren was interviewed a day before Billy Graham’s meetings in New York City, he was wearing a regular suit and tie!

Warren is more concerned with people than with numbers. In 2004, more than 3,000 people accepted Christ as their Savior at Saddleback; of that number, 2,029 were baptized.¹³

Let’s now focus on how dramatically his ministry and his writings have taken the world by storm.

What has been the impact of Warren’s Purpose Driven Life?

In his recent survey (May 2005) on books that have most influenced pastors, George Barna discovered that Rick Warren’s two books topped the list, with one out of every five senior pastors (21 percent) naming *The Purpose Driven Life* (PDL) and *The Purpose Driven Church* (PDC) as the most helpful in the last three years. PDL is the most popular of the religious titles among evangelicals (60 percent of whom have read the book), and it also did well among nonevangelical, born-again Christians (25 percent). Within those markets, PDL is a hit particularly among upscale baby boomers. Conservatives were twice as likely to have read Warren’s tome as other groups surveyed.¹⁴

In a later Barna survey (June 2005), the three best-selling, fiction and nonfiction religious books in the past few years have been the books in the *Left Behind*™ series by Jerry Jenkins and Timothy LaHaye, *The Da Vinci Code* by Daniel Brown, and *The Purpose Driven Life* by Rick Warren. *The Da Vinci Code* was the best-known, being familiar to four out of five adults surveyed; PDL was known to almost two-thirds of religious readers.¹⁵

12. Timothy C. Morgan, “Purpose Driven in Rwanda,” *Christianity Today*, October 2005, 36.

13. Abanes, 8.

14. Barna Group Update email, May 30, 2005.

15. Barna Group Update email, June 28, 2005.

As of June 2005, *PDL* was the best-selling nonfiction hardback book in history, with sales of more than twenty-six million copies—clearly a book that has taken the world by storm. This is an astounding achievement. This means Warren has had more exposure to the general public, as well as to Christians, than any other Christian author. Clearly, when he speaks, others listen. Imagine—*PDL* is listed as “one of the one hundred Christian books that changed the twentieth century!”¹⁶

PDL has been topping the *New York Times* bestseller list for nonfiction for more than 115 weeks (as of June 2005). It has been translated into many languages and sells well in developing countries, notably China.

On a full-page advertisement in *Christianity Today*, Christianbook.com’s “Top Ten Bestsellers” lists *PDL* as number 1; number 2, *Your Best Life Now*, is authored by Joel Osteen, the pastor of another megachurch, in Houston, Texas.¹⁷

Bruce Ryskamp, president of Zondervan Publishing, declares that *PDL* and *PDC* are more than bestsellers, they are a movement.¹⁸

Rich Karlgaard, publisher of *Forbes* magazine, called *PDL* “the best book in entrepreneurship, business, and investment in a long time.” He then compared Warren’s success by comparing it to the growth of Dell or Starbucks, saying that Warren had the ability to “identify a consumer need—a religious consumer need—and fill it.” What was that need? The need of the unchurched.¹⁹

The cover story of *Christianity Today*, October 2005, featured Rick and Kay surrounded by hundreds of Africans under the legend, “Rick Warren has a sweeping plan to defeat poverty.” The cover story, “Purpose Driven in Rwanda,” features the Warrens’ July 2005 trip to Kigali, Rwanda, accompanied by forty-two other American evangelicals, where the group joined nine thousand Rwandan Christians “in launching the first Purpose Driven Nation initiative to harness business people, politicians, and pastors against the nation’s biggest social problems.”²⁰

These amazing statistics and undebatable popularity may numb the doctrinal discernment of many.

16. <www.pastors.com/aboutus/>

17. As of June 2005.

18. <www.assistnews.net/STORIES/2004/s04120087.htm> 12/23/04. That is precisely what they call themselves, “Purpose Driven movement”—see Pastors.com.

19. Abanes, op. cit., 82.

20. Morgan, op. cit., 32.

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What have been the marketing techniques that have succeeded so well?

Warren's consultant in his management process is CMS, a full-service marketing agency. CMS says, "We view it as our mission to help our clients grow their businesses. We do this by working with each client identifying opportunities and developing innovative, creative and profitable services which assist them in the execution of effective marketing, sales and communications program. . . .

"We are best able to serve clients when they allow us to act as partners. . . . CMS is made up of a team of talented individuals whose dedication and expertise have earned them a solid reputation for creating results."²¹

CMS clients include Quaker, Isuzu Motors America, City of West Covina, Purpose Driven Ministries, Saddleback Valley Community Church, Smalley Relationship Center, and Walk Thru the Bible, a project headed by Bruce Wilkinson, author of *The Prayer of Jabez*.²²

Peter Drucker, dean of American management, calls Rick Warren "the inventor of perpetual revival" and Saddleback's organizational model "the most significant sociological phenomena of the second half of this century."²³

Why bring in Peter Drucker? Drucker, legendary management guru, was the first to help business leaders understand that they had to define their businesses from a customer's perspective. Drucker did much to help Japan rethink its business strategy in the last twenty years; since these principles worked so well with corporations, they were also echoed in church management. And the race was on.

Obviously, focusing on a "customer's perspective" brings "success" wherever tried. People feel satisfied, and they come and buy. That's how advertisers lure customers—by focusing on "felt needs." Drucker's management skills worked well for Robert Schuller, the possibility thinker who called Mikhail Gorbachev a Christian disciple despite the protests of this unrepentant Communist. And if these management principles worked so well for Robert Schuller, they surely should work well for Saddleback and Rick Warren.

21. <www.christian-ministry.com/default.htm>; <www.christian-ministry.com/aboutus_who.htm>.

22. <www.christian-ministry.com/clients.htm>.

23. <www.Saddlebackfamily.com>.

Who have been most critical of PDL?

Many evangelicals who oppose Rick Warren work from a Calvinist framework. John F. MacArthur wrote, “The philosophy that marries marketing techniques with church growth theory is the result of bad theology. It assumes that if you package the gospel right, people will get saved. It is rooted in Arminianism, which makes the human will, not a sovereign God, the decisive factor in salvation. It speaks of conversion as a ‘decision for Christ.’”²⁴

What makes this criticism more than interesting is that Warren, while working with certain Arminian-Wesleyan concepts, has also adopted several aspects of Calvinism, including man’s depravity, the eternal security of the saints, and, at times, the unconditional election of certain persons for salvation. However, all of this is a mixed bag for Warren—the Arminian—because he seems to promote the teaching that Christians cannot lose their salvation after they “accept” Jesus. “You didn’t do anything to earn your salvation,” he says, “and you can’t do anything to lose it.”²⁵

Another Grand Canyon divide comes from the verbal inerrantists, those who believe that every word of the Bible is God dictated. This group is the largest group to have written extensively against Rick Warren’s program, it seems to me.

Others, both Calvinist and Arminian, wonder why Warren does not preach against specific sins such as homosexuality or abortion. But he does, although not in his books. Warren does believe abortion and sexual infidelity are wrong, categorically wrong.²⁶

24. *Ashamed of the Gospel: When the Church Becomes Like the World* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1993), 84, 85. Probably to confuse MacArthur further, Warren wrote (in his contribution to *From the Ashes—A Spiritual Response to the Attack on America* [Emmaus, Pa.: Rodale Press, 2002]), “God has given us a free will. Made in God’s image, we have been given the freedom to decide how we will act and the ability to make moral choices. . . . We must choose to do God’s will every day. It isn’t automatic. . . . We were made for relationship with God, but he waits for us to choose him.” 130, 131.

25. “What We Believe: If I Accept Jesus Christ Is My Salvation Forever?” <www.saddleback.org>.

26. In Warren’s pulpit sermon titled “Maintaining Moral Purity,” he said, “God’s standards have never changed. Premarital sex is unacceptable to God. It always has been. It always will be. Living together without getting married is unacceptable to God. It always has been. It always will be. Adultery, having an affair, being unfaithful to somebody you’re married to is unacceptable to God. It always has been and it always will be. Homosexuality is unacceptable to God. It always has been. It always will be. Pornography is unacceptable to God. It always has been. It always will be. Every one of those things brings a judgment. If you have been guilty of one or all of these things I’ve just mentioned you’ve come to the right place. This is what Saddleback’s all about. A place for

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Which brings up an observation that I think is being overlooked. *PDL* is not Warren's systematic theology any more than any of my books, in themselves, contain everything I believe on theological subjects. *PDL* is a devotional guide meant primarily for (1) unbelievers, (2) those who have lost an earlier relationship with God, and (3) the average Christian seeking a simple daily reading plan.²⁷ Of course, with such a wide array of readers, it is hard to distinguish between what is aimed at the unbeliever and that which is aimed at the postconversion believer.

If one wants to know what Warren's doctrinal beliefs are, his Saddleback Web sites are easy to read. Any reader will quickly discover that Warren takes a high view of biblical doctrines, as he understands them. Adventists will note those key areas where Calvinism circulates through his theological system.

Others have spoken freely about Warren's spiritual fast-food and junk food—that it feeds people what they are clamoring for and that it compensates for their lack of true repentance. These critics believe that when we use energizing music, emotional stimuli, and short, light messages to satisfy the flesh with its “felt” needs, we tend to obscure our deeper spiritual needs.

Let's now try to see why Rick Warren's Purpose Driven ministry has satisfied such a broad spectrum of many hundreds of thousands of laypeople, as well as tens of thousands of Christian pastors.

healing, forgiveness, restoration. God says, 'I want to give you a chance to come clean and start over and make the rest of your life the best of your life.' . . . What is the pathway back to purity? Repent. Repent means 'to change your mind.' . . . It means I change my mind and say, 'You are right, God, it was wrong. It's sin.' I don't rationalize it. I don't excuse it. I don't say everybody's doing it. I say, 'It was wrong.' ”

27. Abanes, op. cit., 77.