What is the Purpose-Driven approach to preaching?
By Dr. Paul M. Elliott

This is the seventh in a series of articles about the Purpose-Driven Church movement.

Just as pragmatism pervades the "worship" of the Purpose-Driven Church, it also poisons the preaching.

Preaching That Neglects Christians

The chapter on preaching is one of the shortest in *The Purpose-Driven Church*, and author Rick Warren devotes little space to the actual discussion of preaching. However, Warren does offer a few points about the task of preaching itself:

"You can't communicate with people until you find something you have in common with them. With the unchurched, you will not establish common ground by saying, 'Let's open our Bibles to Isaiah, chapter 14, as we continue our study of this wonderful book.' The ground we have in common with unbelievers is not the Bible, but our common needs, hurts, and interests as human beings. You cannot start with a text."¹

"Select your Scripture readings with the unchurched in mind. While all Scripture is equally inspired by God, it is not all equally applicable to unbelievers....Certain texts require more explanation than others. With this in mind, at Saddleback we like to use passages that don't require any previous understanding."²

"Plan your titles to appeal to the unchurched....if you judged Saddleback on the basis of sermon titles only, you might conclude we're pretty shallow. But since Christians aren't our target, we're not being shallow, we're being strategic."³
Evangelism Minus the Evangel

On the subject of the Gospel in preaching, Warren gives this advice:

"Be creative in inviting people to receive Christ." [But as we have seen, Warren has an un-Biblical definition of what it means to "receive Christ" and actually preaches a false gospel.]

"Offer multiple ways to indicate a commitment to Christ" [as though there were, according to Scripture, more than one way]

"Keep in mind that you're asking people to make the most important decision of their lives...It's pretty unrealistic to expect a forty-year-old man to completely change the direction of his life on the basis of one thirty-minute message. Would you keep going to a grocery store if every time you went there to buy milk, the clerks pressured you to buy a steak? Imagine a clerk saying 'Today is the day of steak! Now is the time for steak! You must buy steak today because you might not have steak tomorrow!' "

In the last quotation, Warren parodies and ridicules passages such as these, which stress the urgency of the authentic Gospel invitation:

"We then, as workers together with Him also plead with you not to receive the grace of God in vain. For He says: 'In an acceptable time I have heard you, And in the day of salvation I have helped you.' Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation." (2 Corinthians 6:1-2)

"Then He spoke a parable to them, saying: "The ground of a certain rich man yielded plentifully. And he thought within himself, saying, 'What shall I do, since I have no room to store my crops?' So he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build greater, and there I will store all my crops and my goods. And I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years;
take your ease; eat, drink, and be merry." ' But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul will be required of you; then whose will those things be which you have provided?" (Luke 12:16-20)

"Say to them: 'As I live,' says the Lord God, 'I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn, turn from your evil ways! For why should you die, O house of Israel?" (Ezekiel 33:11)

"He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God." (John 3:18)

Firsthand Observations

In his book, This Little Church Went to Market, Gary Gilley relates an experience that is all too typical of what takes place in the Purpose-Driven Church environment:

"My wife and I recently attended a worship service of an evangelical church which has adopted the purpose-driven model popularized by Warren. The service was disturbing on a number of fronts, including irreverent worship, unbiblical musical selections and a general attitude of apathy. The pastor, surely a well-meaning and sincere servant of God, had no clue how to exegete the Scriptures. In his topical message, he pointed the congregation, by means of PowerPoint slides, to dozens of passages. But in astounding fashion he managed to misinterpret, either through spiritualizing, missing the context, reading a poor translation, etc., every single passage. Not once did he provide the correct interpretation of any verse of Scripture, yet as far as I could see no one seemed to notice or care."

An Honest Reflection of Evangelicalism Today

Gilley then offers these very telling observations:
"This gave me further insight into what I have been suspecting and observing. Warren's philosophy of ministry, misuse of Scripture, weak gospel message, infiltration of psychology and disregard for theology is being embraced by evangelicalism because that is where much of evangelicalism is already residing. Warren is not so much an initiator as he is a product of his time. I believe he has caught the wave of what was already happening in evangelicalism. What he has done successfully is connect the dots - develop methods, programs and a message that seems to work. Pragmatism has become the final arbitrator in our society and increasingly in our churches. 'If it works it must be of God', so goes the conventional wisdom. But pragmatism is an unreliable trailblazer. In our more reflective moments few of us are willing to believe that success can always have the final word. For example, Mormonism is the most successful 'church' in the world today. Yet none of us is willing to believe that God is blessing the Mormon church. If pragmatism is our guide, we will be hopelessly tossed about by every wind of doctrine (Eph. 4:14)."7

**Authentic Christianity in Contrast**

God did not call anyone to be a pastor of a church who is not a faithful preacher of the authentic Gospel and a sound expositor of the Word. That is the preacher's job. In 2nd Timothy chapter 4:1-5, the Apostle Paul challenges Timothy thus:

"I charge you therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom: Preach the Word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables [to human myths rather than
the reality of God's truth]. But you be watchful in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry."

Paul says to Timothy: Preach the Word of God and nothing else! Stand ready to do it at all times and in every kind of situation - "in season and out of season." The force of the original language is this: "Preach the Word when the Word is welcome in the ears of your hearers, yes; but also preach the Word when the Word is unwelcome in the ears of your hearers." But always, the Word! Your preaching, Timothy, is not about felt needs. Your preaching, Timothy, is not about success in human terms. Your preaching, Timothy, is not about self-esteem. Your preaching, Timothy, is not driven by what people want to hear or don't want to hear. Your preaching, Timothy, is to be Scripture-driven preaching. Preach the Word, Timothy! Preach that, and nothing else!

And Paul's challenge to Timothy comes immediately on the heels of this great declaration about the Word of God and preaching: "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work." And then in the verses that follow, the Apostle Paul tells Timothy to "reprove, rebuke, and exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine."

The word translated "reprove" means to expose error. The word translated "rebuke" means to denounce error, to express strong disapproval of it. The word "exhort" means to earnestly beg and plead with people, to encourage them, to urge them in the right direction. "Reprove, rebuke, and exhort." How? "With all longsuffering and doctrine." Do it with patience. Do it without ceasing. Do it unfailingly. And do it with doctrine - instruct the people of God from the Word of God. Christian preacher, make sure your preaching of the Word, make sure your reproof, your correction, your instruction in righteousness, is from the Word of God and not the word of man.
And why is the preacher to do this? Because, Paul says in verse 3, "the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine." People won't want to put up with it. They will want to hear what they want to hear. They will want the service and the preaching to appeal to the natural man, the man who cannot receive the things of the Spirit of God because the Spirit of God isn't living in him. They will want to be the Purpose-Driven Church, driven by man's purposes, not by God's purpose.

And it's interesting to note that Paul by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit uses the phrase "sound doctrine." The Greek word that is translated "sound" is the word from which we get our English word "hygiene." The word in the Greek has the meaning, "healthy". And it also carried the meaning "accurate". The sense of the phrase "sound doctrine" is, "teaching that is free from any mixture of error." Sound teaching. Healthy teaching.

A preacher who is not preaching sound doctrine from the Word of God, is no preacher at all. Ephesians 4:11 in the original language states that the role of the pastor is "shepherd/teacher". The job of the shepherd is to lead the sheep in the path of sound doctrine.

References:

5. *The Purpose-Driven Church*, page 305.

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The Purpose Driven Life is Warren’s effort to consolidate the brand he’s built out of church-growth advocacy. Instead of aiming the book at practicing Christians or fellow pastors (as he did with The Purpose Driven Church and continues to do on his Web site, www.Pastors.com), Warren is seeking to engage with a nonbelieving (or languidly believing) person in spiritual crisis. And his businesslike, bullet-pointed style is meeting with success. The Purpose Driven Life is the No. 7 best-selling book of nonfiction in the country, according to a Publishers’ Weekly list released on March 3, and has s