

The Purpose-Driven Life

A Review of Scripture Misuse*

If the sense of a passage of Scripture is up for grabs; if your understanding is as good as mine; if a text has more than one meaning and all meanings are equally justified, then why study the Bible at all? Why not think up something you want to teach and then run to the Scriptures to try to find a passage that supports your views? Of course, this has been an all too common practice for years. But now there is a new twist. When a leader wants to develop a certain thesis and ground it in the Scriptures, but no objectively understood passage can support this particular notion, what is to be done? He might force a passage out of context, simply misinterpret it and hope no one notices. Or he might allegorize or spiritualize the passage, adding a foreign meaning. But all of this has been done before. A novel approach, one that might work even better, is to get creative and find a translation or paraphrase that will back your claim -- even if that translation has seriously distorted the passage. With this final methodology, there is the advantage of actually using the Scriptures as the authority and a fair amount of certainty that few will ever bother to check the passage for its accuracy and/or context. All of this brings to mind Peter's comments concerning the untaught and unstable distorting the Scriptures to their own destruction (2 Peter 3:16). The word "distort" in that verse basically means "to torture." It is the idea of twisting Scripture to make it mean something it was not intended to mean, with the end result being our own destruction.

I first discovered this new fad when I visited some market-driven evangelical churches. Here were churches where their worship services were crowded and full of enthusiasm. Spiritual life appeared to flow as the congregations sang praise choruses. But something was missing -- Bibles. I wondered why until I sat through the services and found that Bibles were not needed. The Scriptures were never opened, never read. When the pastor preached, at least he did open his Bible, but he asked no one to open theirs, nor did he expect anyone to do so. He preached a message loosely based on Scripture and throughout his sermon his main points were projected on the overhead screens along with a few Scripture verses. A church with no open Bibles created the scent of spiritual death to me. Many who come to church today are Biblically illiterate. They can barely find Genesis, let alone Ezekiel.

Churches all across the land are following the same methodologies. Apparently the church-growth leaders have been recommending this approach and their disciples have jumped on board -- in many cases, perhaps, without serious evaluation. But it is dangerous for Christians to close their Bibles. What are Bereans to do without their Bibles? What if the leadership of the church has an agenda they want to foster and they misuse the Scriptures to promote it? Who would examine the Word and "see whether these things are so" (Acts 17:11).

The Purpose-Driven Life

About that time, I picked up Rick Warren's runaway bestseller, *The Purpose-Driven Life*. Warren's book promises to be "a guide to a 40-day spiritual journey that will enable you to discover the answers to life's most important question: What on earth am I here for?" More than that, "By the end of this journey you will know God's purpose for your life and will understand the big picture -- how all the pieces of your life fit together" (p.9). With this kind of promo, and with Warren's notoriety, we would expect his book to sell well, and it has. Not only is it the number one best selling Christian book at the time of this writing but thousands of churches are gearing up to take his 40-day spiritual journey.

First, we should say a word or two about Warren himself and his book in general. His first book, *The Purpose-Driven Church*, has greatly influenced churches throughout the world, due certainly to the fact that the church he pastors, Saddleback Church in southern California, is one of the largest churches in America, and a trendsetter among new paradigm churches. Saddleback reports that over 300,000 pastors from over 100 countries have been trained at their leadership conferences. Warren obviously has astounding influence over churches throughout the world.

There are a number of similarities between *The Purpose-Driven Church* and *The Purpose-Driven Life*. Both, for instance, offer some good advice, helpful Biblical insight, and practical suggestions -- AND both are riddled with errors throughout. The highly discerning reader can perhaps sift through the wheat and tares and make a good loaf of bread, but most readers, I fear, will swallow the poison along with the substance. This leads me to ask, "Who is Warren's audience?" I was thoroughly bewildered as to with whom the author was trying to connect. If it is a book for the unsaved, then he fails miserably, for the gospel is never at anytime clearly presented. The closest he came was when he wrote, "Real life begins by committing yourself completely to Jesus Christ" (p. 58). In Warren's gospel, no mention is made of sin, repentance, or even the Cross. Real life (i.e., a life with purpose) seems to be the reward, and lack of real life (purpose) the problem. The thesis of *The Purpose-Driven Life* is stated, I believe, on page twenty-five, "We discover that meaning and purpose only when we make God the reference point of our lives." **Warren's message is this: Find God and you will find yourself (purpose).**

We will agree that meaning and purpose will be a reality to the Christian, but they are not the objects of the gospel itself. The gospel is that we as rebellious sinners have offended a holy God, are dead in our sins, enslaved to sin and the devil, and under the wrath of God. But God, rich in mercy, sent His Son to die as our substitute to redeem us from our lost condition and give us eternal life. We receive this gift by faith as we turn to Christ, and from sin (Ephesians 2:1-10). That our life takes on new purpose at that point is absolutely true. However, we do not come to Christ because we sense a lack of purpose, but because God has opened our eyes to our need for forgiveness of sin and a relationship with Him. This is one of the fatal flaws in the market-driven church's message in which the unbeliever is called to follow Christ in order to receive any number of benefits -- fulfillment, [self-esteem](#), an improved marriage, a thrilling lifestyle, or purpose, rather than freedom from sin and the gift of eternal salvation.

If Warren is writing for new believers, which seems the case due to the elementary tone and substance of the whole book, he again misses the mark, for he uses many expressions and Biblical references that would be unfamiliar to the novice. On the other hand, if he is writing to the mature, he has wasted paper, for any semi-well-taught believer will be completely bored with this book. So, while much praise will surely be lavished on *The Purpose-Driven Life*, it escapes me who will really profit.

As I began reading this book, the problems were so numerous and obvious that I backed up and began marking these errors. I found 42 such Biblical inaccuracies, plus 18 out-of-context passages of Scripture, supposedly used to prove his point, and another nine distorted translations. (More on some of these later in this report). In general, there is much that is disturbing within the pages of *The Purpose-Driven Life*. Even though he denies it, Warren is obviously a disciple of [pop-psychology](#), which is littered throughout. The wise reader is well aware that simply because someone denies they are teaching something does not mean they are not teaching it. ([John MacArthur](#) and [Larry Crabb](#) are good examples of teachers who utilize this technique.) The proof is not in the denial but in the substance.

In this case, Warren, on the one hand, repeatedly rejects psychobabble, but on the other hand, he immerses his readers in it. One example is his statement, "Most conflict is rooted in unmet needs" (p.154). You will find that idea in [Rogers and Freud and Crabb](#), but try to find it in Scripture. He quotes favorably from a wide variety of dubious authors, from Aldous Huxley and Albert Schweitzer to George Bernard Shaw to St. John of the Cross (Catholic mystic). He apparently believes practicing [Roman Catholics](#) are true believers, several times mentioning monks and nuns as Christian examples, and of course the obligatory reference to [Mother Teresa](#) (twice). This unqualified acceptance and promotion of Catholics brings into question Warren's understanding of the gospel message itself. If he believes that faithful Roman Catholics, who believe in a works-righteousness, are born-again Christians, what does he believe the gospel is? Do we receive the gift of salvation by faith alone, or by faith plus certain works and sacraments? This is no minor issue, especially in a book that never spells out the plan of salvation.

When every third page (on average) of a book presents either an unbiblical, or at least a Biblically unsupportable idea, there is not much sense bothering to read it. And that would be my suggestion-- don't bother.

Torturing Scripture

What we want to do in the remainder of our examination of Warren's popular book is to point out some examples of his distortion of Scripture. This is not to say that everything he says is wrong. The irony is that often he will say something that is Biblically correct, but rather than use proper Scriptural support, he chooses to twist the meaning of some other passage to prove his point. Our concern here is focused on his blatant twisting of the Biblical text to suit his purposes.

Matthew 16:25

As stated above, it is not unusual for Warren to make good statements, such as his rejection of pop-psychology, then turn around and by his misuse of Scripture promote the very thing he just condemned. The reader is then faced with two problems: What does Warren really believe about this subject, and more importantly, why has he chosen to either distort the Word of God directly or through his use of faulty translations? For example, in the midst of his denial of pop-psychology (p. 19), he quotes *The Message* translation of Matthew 16:25 -- *Self-help is no help at all. Self-sacrifice is the way, my way, **to finding yourself**, your true self* (emphasis mine throughout). *The Message* has altered the meaning of Jesus' words into a means by which a person finds himself, a fad having roots back to the 1960s but not to the Bible. Compare the NASB rendering: "For whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake shall find it." Jesus is speaking of eternal life (v. 26 makes this clear), not the modern day concept of "finding yourself."

There is a bit of bait-and-switch going on in many of these quotes. Warren is attempting to tap into the current felt-needs making the rounds-- in this case finding ourselves and/or finding our purpose in life. He is then presenting the Christian life as a means of meeting that felt-need. It is true that the Lord will give you purpose in life, but that purpose will be to live for and follow Christ. It is not a promise that we will find ourselves (if you ever find yourself you are going to be disappointed anyway) but that we will find true life in Christ. What often happens is subtle: Warren turns these passages, and the Christian life, from being Christ-centered to being centered on the human self, the individual. The focus now becomes us rather than Christ.

Romans 12:3

The thesis of the book is found on page 25, where Warren says, "We discover that meaning and purpose only when we make God the reference point of our lives." *The Message* paraphrase of Romans 12:3 says, *The **only accurate way to understand ourselves** is by what God is and by what he does for us.* *The Message* has subtly changed the meaning of the text. The NASB reads, *For by the grace given to me I say to every man among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith.* The thrust of the verse is the problem of pride, in the context of spiritual gifts (see verses 4-8). Apparently, some in the church body were arrogant about their spiritual gifts, leading to anger, bitterness and vengeance (see verses 9-21). Paul told them not to think so highly of themselves but to have sound judgment in reference to their giftedness. The result would be the proper functioning of the body. The passage is not giving a formula for how to understand ourselves. *The Message* abuses the true meaning of the text, yet Warren quotes it to support his thesis.

In both of these examples Warren's use of Scripture is not even close enough to be confusing, let alone accepted without question. This is not a minor issue. Once we believe we have the right to change the meaning of God's Word to suit our agenda, there is no limit as to how far the misrepresentation of God's truth can go. This is exactly how

virtually every cult and heresy is started. It should disturb us even more to discover that so few Christians care.

I Corinthians 2:7

In chapter one, Warren makes several statements with which I would agree. He writes that the Bible “explains what no self-help or philosophy book could know” (p. 20). He then quotes 1 Corinthians 2:7 from *The Message* paraphrase as support: *God’s wisdom... goes deep into the interior of his purposes.... It’s not the latest message, but more like the oldest -- what God determined as the **way to bring out his best in us*** (emphasis mine throughout). Let’s first compare this to the NASB: *but we speak God’s wisdom in a mystery, the hidden wisdom, which God predestined before the ages to our glory*. Just a quick reading reveals that *The Message*’s paraphrase has no real connection with the meaning Paul was intending. Paul was writing of the wisdom of God, which is unlike the world’s in several ways. First, it is a mystery, which in Scripture speaks of something hidden in the past and unknowable without revelation from God (see Ephesians 3:3-5). God’s wisdom is still hidden from the people of the world (vv. 6, 8), but revealed to God’s people through the Holy Spirit in the New Testament Scriptures. God had determined this wisdom before time began, but has now worked it out in the present age. All of this was for *our glory*. In the context of the passage, this refers to the eternal salvation of God’s people as a result of the crucifixion of Christ (see v. 8). *Our glory* is Biblical language referring to the final goal of salvation, which is to share in the glory of the Lord Himself (v. 8b). Now, let’s back up to Warren and his use of *The Message*. The wisdom of God that has been revealed through the apostle Paul is not that God has determined “the way to bring out His best in us,” but that the Lord has determined the way to bring us to eternal glory. It is not about purpose in life, but about the truth of salvation. The problem is that he is misusing Scripture, in a rather imaginative fashion, to prove his position.

Ephesians 1:11

A similar type of thing happens in the very next paragraph of the book. Warren makes a Biblically defensible statement, “You must build your life on eternal truths, not pop psychology, success-motivation, or inspirational stories.” But rather than backing this truth with proper Scripture, he decides to use a distorted paraphrase of Ephesians 1:11, found in *The Message* once again. It reads, *It’s in Christ that we **find out who we are and what we are living for**. Long before we first heard of Christ and got our hopes up, he had his eyes on us, had designs on us for glorious living, part of the overall purpose he is working out in everything and everyone*. Warren says that this quote gives us three insights into our purpose, the first of which is, “You discover your identity and purpose through a relationship with Jesus Christ.”

The NASB reads: *Also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will*. This verse says nothing about **discovering** our purpose through a relationship with Christ. It speaks about our position in Christ -- our eternal inheritance in Him. This verse tells us that we

have been made the heirs of God; through no merit of our own we were given the right to all the blessings of salvation, both now and in eternity. It speaks of being “predestined according to His purpose,” not finding our purpose or identity.

Jeremiah 29:11

A more common form of misuse of Scripture is taking passages out of context. Warren gives this exaggerated promise, “If you have felt hopeless, hold on! Wonderful changes are going to happen in your life as you begin to live it on purpose,” followed up with this quote from Jeremiah 29:11, *I know what I am planning for you.... “I have good plans for you, not plans to hurt you. I will give you hope and a good future”* (p. 31). But this is a promise to Israel concerning their future, not a general promise for all people (even Christians) at all times. Just a few chapters later, the promise is reversed, *Behold, I am watching over them for harm and not for good...* (44:27). And in Lamentations 3:38, the same prophet writes, *Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that both good and ill go forth?* It is strange how people love to claim Jeremiah 29:11 and ignore passages such as these last two. I have yet to find anyone who has claimed Jeremiah 44:27 as their life’s verse.

Genesis 6:8

Chapter nine is devoted to the kind of person who makes God smile and is rooted in this *Living Bible* paraphrase of Genesis 6:8: *Noah was a pleasure to the Lord*. The *New King James* translates this verse, *Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord*. Some other literal versions translate “grace” as “favor,” and the Hebrew word can have that meaning. But when used of God, the word always means unmerited favor or grace. When Noah found grace, he was the recipient of undeserved Divine favor. He was not spared the flood because of his righteousness, but because of God’s grace. By changing the word from “grace” to “pleasure,” the *Living Bible* has turned the true meaning of the passage on its head. Now Noah is spared due to his goodness -- he is the kind of guy that makes God smile -- and you can be such a person too. But now grace is no longer grace; it has been transformed into a work that pleases God. This is not a minor error. It strikes at the root of the Christian faith. (Ironically, Genesis 6:9, which tells us that *Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his time, and Noah walked with God*, could have been used to support Warren’s chapter, so keep in mind our concern. We are not accusing Warren of being wrong in everything he is saying, but we are accusing him of distorting Scripture.) Warren is undermining the Word of God by changing its meaning to suit his purposes. In this case the marvelous doctrine of grace takes the hit.

Job 22:21

Warren strains Scripture to interesting limits by using none other than Eliphaz as his spokesman. “The Bible is crystal clear about how you benefit when you fully surrender your life to God. First you experience peace” (p. 82). The proof-text is Job 22:21, *Stop quarreling with God! If you agree with him, you will have peace at last, and things will go well for you*. If you recall, this speech from Job’s friend is a promotion of works-

righteousness which, along with Eliphaz's whole theology of living, will be condemned by God later in the book. To use it as a means of finding peace with God is, at minimum, an extremely careless use of Scripture.

Romans 6:17

In the same paragraph, Warren also promises freedom if we surrender to God. He uses *The Message's* rendering of Romans 6:17: *Offer yourselves to the ways of God and the freedom never quits.... [his] commands set you free to live openly in freedom!* It is true that we have been set free in Christ, but what kind of freedom is Paul offering? The NASB translates this verse: *But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed.* Verse eighteen continues, *and having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness.* Warren does not mention that the freedom promised in Scripture is from sin, and that the believer becomes immediately the slave of another -- righteousness. Nor is there any mention that this slavery transferal is **not** predicated upon a subsequent surrender on the part of the Christian, but rather is actually the definition of a Christian. When people come to Christ for salvation, their master is changed. They no longer owe any allegiance to sin for they have become the slave of God. Whether they live in fidelity to this new Master is another matter, but ownership has changed hands. This is the argument of Romans Six, which is ignored by Warren. Instead, he forces it to say what God never intended.

Hebrews 12:1

Warren uses *The Living Bible* paraphrase of Hebrews 12:1 to teach that God has assigned certain boundaries to each believer: "When we try to overextend our ministry reach beyond what God shaped us for, we experience stress. Just as each runner in a race is given a different lane to run in, we must individually *run with patience the particular race that God has set before us*" (p. 253). But this verse simply reads: *Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us* (NASB), and is speaking of the Christian race of faith in general. This verse cannot be pressed to teach that each Christian has a **particular** race to run -- it is simply not the context or meaning of the passage.

Philippians 4:7

We are told that "worry is the warning light that God has been shoved to the sideline. The moment you put him back at the center, you will have peace again" (p. 314). He then quotes *The Message's* translation of Philippians 4:7: *A sense of God's wholeness...will come and settle you down. It's wonderful what happens when Christ displaces worry at the center of your life.* While there may be truth in what Warren says, a proper translation of this verse will not teach what he says it does: *And the peace of God which surpasses all comprehension, shall guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus* (NASB). Let's break it down a bit. "A sense of God's wholeness," whatever that means, is not the same thing as the peace of God. The last sentence found in *The Message* is foreign to the passage. The peace of God guarding our hearts and minds cannot be contorted to mean

that something wonderful happens when Christ displaces worry at the center of your life. Warren is developing his propositions upon faulty paraphrases of Scripture and the average reader is none the wiser. Placing God back at the center of your life may indeed result in peace, but, and this is the important thing, Philippians 4:7 does not say so. To make Scripture say what it does not say is manipulation, not exegesis.

Of course we could go on, but hopefully you get the point. Other notable examples of Warren contorting Scripture are:

Page 24 -- James 1:18
Pages 25, 30 -- Isaiah 49:4
Page 104 -- I Corinthians 14:16-17
Page 105 -- Romans 12:1,2
Page 109 -- Job 23: 8-10
Page 110 -- Job 7:11
Page 219 -- II Corinthians 3:18
Page 223 -- Habakkuk 2:3
Page 232 -- Mark 8:35
Pages 272-273 -- I Corinthians 1:27
Pages 273 -- II Corinthians 12:9-10

Summary

So, what difference does all this make? What if Warren is misrepresenting Scripture over 40 times as well as peppering his book with extra-Biblical psychological theories and other earthly pieces of wisdom, disguised as Biblical principles? Overall he says some good things, and even in the sections where Scripture is abused, he sometimes says the right thing, but uses wrong Scripture to support it. What's the big deal? The big deal is this: Once we sign off on this kind of "Christian" teaching and torturing of Scripture, the sky is the limit. It should not go without notice that every cult claims to believe in the Bible. The [uniqueness of cults](#) is that they twist the interpretation of Scripture to say what they want it to say, and failing that, they write their own translations to support their heresies (e.g. [Jehovah Witnesses' New World Bible](#)). Should we then endorse these same methodologies when professing evangelicals promote them? Or should we refute those who openly sanction such approaches to Scripture? Remember, we are not discussing different opinions on interpretations of certain passages. That too cannot be ignored. But of a more serious nature is this careless and wanton mishandling of Scripture that we have been discussing. To purposely ignore the proper translation of a passage and insert one that has no basis in the original languages in order to undergird a particular point of view is one of the most dangerous things imaginable. The only thing more concerning would be to discover large segments of the evangelical community being incapable of discerning this kind of problem -- and/or not caring.

* The material in this report was excerpted and/or adapted from a [two-part report](#) by Gary Gilley, Southern View Chapel, Springfield, IL (“The Purpose-Driven Life: An Evaluation,” October & November 2003, *Think on These Things*).