

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	Special Messages		Pastor/Teacher
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Handling the Word of God

In one issue of *TableTalk*, R.C. Sproul drew an analogy between John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* and Rick Warren's mega-bestseller *The Purpose Driven Life*. "There is a stark contrast between the second best-seller in the history of the English language, second only to the Bible, namely, John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, and the runaway best-seller of the last two years, *The Purpose Driven Life*. In Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, we see set forth in masterful literary style the depths and the riches of the biblical Gospel. When we compare it to *The Purpose Driven Life*, we see a book in which it is difficult to find a full explanation of the biblical Gospel. Justification, the relief from the burden of sin that weighs down the soul, is all but absent in the setting forth of a new and different gospel of achieving or discovering purpose in one's life."¹ Scott Clark, one of my colleagues involved in a book I co-edited (and a professor at Westminster in California) addressed this issue on his website. "Recently a correspondent asked, 'What is the covenantal response to the purpose-driven life?' I can't speak for all 'covenant' theologians and I don't know that there is a distinctly 'covenantal' answer to this question (your question may assume things about covenant theology that I don't know or share) but those who adhere to the Reformed Confessions (e.g., the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, the Canons of Dort, the Westminster Standards) have generally been quite critical of Rick Warren's 'purpose-driven life' program. The three parts of the Heidelberg Catechism are: guilt (law), grace (gospel), and gratitude (thankful obedience to the moral will of God). This is a rather different program than the PDL offers. One big problem with the PDL is that it seems to reduce the faith to a series of steps or maxims that, if implemented, lead to happiness, prosperity, or whatever. I'm not sure how this isn't just re-packaged Methodism or higher life stuff. In the Reformed view, the Christian life is 'dying to self' and 'living to Christ' (Heidelberg Catechism Q. 88-90). Another major problem is that Warren trivializes Christianity this way. Would anyone deduce the PDL from Scripture read on its own terms? Is Paul really concerned about the same things about which the PDL is? Where is Christ in the midst of this program? How is Scripture used? It seems to be marked by a shoddy use of Scripture. If the PDL could be transplanted to a Mormon or Unitarian congregation (and it could) how is it Christian at all? Another problem, and perhaps its greatest, is that the PDL confuses the law with the gospel (and what the gospel is, isn't always very clear in Warren's public presentations). There's nothing wrong with the idea of 'purpose' per se and it's undeniable that many people today seem to lack purpose in their lives, but the Westminster Shorter Catechism addressed this in 1647: the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. I don't think it is quite what the PDL is about. Humans were created to glorify God. Adam, and we in him, failed and Christ (and all believers in him) succeeded. Believers benefit from Christ's life and death by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. Our purpose as believers is to believe the gospel, and as a consequence of God's grace, to love God and our neighbor. As far as a 'covenantal' response (it's really the same stuff as above put in redemptive-historical categories) one might say that the PDL confuses the covenant of works (Adam's covenant in which God said, in essence, 'do this and live') with the covenant of grace (which says that 'Christ has done for his people.')" www.Heidelblog/2007/1/11/. The approach taken by Rick Warren in his use of the Bible stands in sharp contrast not only with that of John Bunyan, but with the whole Reformed tradition.

I. THE PROBLEM CONFRONTING BIBLE STUDY

We noted in our series “Growing In Grace” (April 28, 2002-Sept. 21, 2003) that the Scriptures are essential to Christian growth and are appointed by God as a means of grace. J.I. Packer has lamented the sad decline in Bible reading, both personal and in our churches. “The use of the Bible has largely ceased in the pulpit and pew, as well as in the home. The preacher with Bible in hand, referring to Scripture as he goes along, is nowadays an unusual sight, and as direct consequence the listener has no Bible in his hand either. He has learned that he is not likely to need one, since preachers make so little obvious reference to Scripture. The lectern Bible is still the only copy of the word of God to be seen in many churches, even during public worship. The Sunday School, where it still exists, may boast many visual aids, and of course the stories taught will generally come from the Bible, but the Bible itself in the teacher’s hand as authority and inspiration is nowadays often missing. Within the church as well as among those without who do not attend, though the Bible is revered in a vague and general way, its riches are unknown, and its contents are no longer common coin and daily bread among the people of God.”² Perhaps even more alarming is the degree to which the Bible is abused or misused in our churches. How?

- A. One wrong approach views the Bible as a golden treasure chest where gems are stored. It then becomes our task to dig these gems out of the Bible and to view them in their splendor. One very popular approach is to distill principles for practical living. Often times these concepts show little awareness for the theological context of the passages that are cited. This approach has more in common with Benjamin Franklin’s *Poor Richard’s Almanac* than it does with the Bible. To do Bible study this way, is to miss the historical and cultural context of Scripture.
- B. A second wrong approach views the Bible as a collection of moral teachings. Biblical characters then provide examples, either bad or good, of how to behave. One could just as well use Aesop’s fables or Grimm’s fairy tales. Many evangelical publishers write their Sunday School and VBS curriculum, especially for younger ages, on the basis of this approach to the Bible. The lessons are built around the lives of the heroes of the faith who furnish examples of good behavior and godliness. This approach is also seen in a method of Bible study entitled “Character Study.” John White warns that problems arise when we try to determine whether a particular action is to be condemned or approved. There are even incidents in which something God commands can hardly be considered examples for our behavior. For example, when God commanded Saul to kill all of the Amalekites and all of their flocks, Saul brought back some of the cattle and Agag, who was king of the Amalekites. Then at God’s command Samuel hewed Agag to pieces before the Lord in Gilgal (I Samuel 15:33). What lesson in right living is to be learned from the incident?³
- C. A third approach to the Bible is as a source of proof texts for theological truth. A person using this approach goes here and there in the Bible, gathering verses that prove a particular theological position. The problem with this approach is that much of Scripture is not systematically organized. If God had intended us to view the Bible as a dictionary of religious truths, He would have given it to us in that form. B.B. Warfield took the noted Bible teacher and president of the Moody Bible Institute, R.A. Torrey to task for this approach, which Warfield contended was simply “proof-texting.”⁴
- D. Note that in II Timothy 2:15 Paul insists that it is not enough for the preacher to know the Word of God; he must know the people to whom he is preaching. J.R.W. Stott writes, “He must not, of course, falsify God’s Word in order to make it more appealing. He cannot dilute the strong medicine of Scripture to render it more sweet to the taste. But he may seek to present it to the people in such a way as to commend it to them. For one thing, he will make it simple. This surely is what Paul meant when he told Timothy to be ‘a workman who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling

the word of truth' (2 Tim. 2:15). The verb, *orthotomounta*, means literally, 'cutting straight'. It was employed of road making and is, for instance, used in the LXX of Proverbs 3:6: 'He will make straight [A.V., "direct"] your paths'. Our exposition of the Scripture is to be so simple and direct, so easily intelligible, that it resembles a straight road. It is easy to follow it. It is like Isaiah's highway of the redeemed: even 'fools shall not err therein' (Is. 35:8)."⁵

CONCLUSION: The Bible does richly reward those who seek its inspiration, admonition, and instruction. Yet as White observes, something is lacking in each of these approaches. What, then, is a proper approach to the Bible? When we study the structure of the Bible itself, two things become clear: it is historical, and it unfolds the plan of redemption. The Bible tells us how God is moving to restore man to the Garden of Eden and to his place as vicegerent in God's world.⁶ When we get sidetracked whether it is by treating the Bible like crystal ball trying to predict the future or by looking at it like a roadmap for personal success we are misusing the Bible. "Jesus rebuked the Pharisees for their abuse of the Old Testament saying, 'You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life' (John 5:39a). How much more do we think he would scold those of our day who fail to focus on issues pertaining to eternal life and instead on having 'Your Best Life Now!' The long and the short of it is that the Bible is not about you, your life, improving your marriage, managing your finances, growing kids God's way, or helping you to realize your full potential. Yes, the Bible does contain instructions concerning how Christians are to conduct themselves in light of the gospel, but admitting that the Bible contains these instructions is not the same as suggesting that the Bible is about these life lessons. Jesus himself told the Pharisees what the Scriptures were about when he said that these sacred texts 'bear witness about me' (John 5:39b). Now here is something that deserves our reflection!"⁷

ENDNOTES

¹ *TableTalk* (Jan. 2006), p. 4.

² J.I. Packer, *Beyond The Battle For The Bible* (Crossway, 1980), p. 62. Packer made this observation over 25 years ago. What would he say about today's situation?!

³ John White, "Approaching The Bible For Study" in *The Book of Books: Essays on the Scriptures in Honor of Johannes G. Vos* (P&R, 1978), p. 14.

⁴ Warfield says, "We have not the remotest intention of suggesting that Mr. Torrey is not striving to give the pure teaching of the Bible in these propositions; neither do we doubt that he succeeds in giving the pure teaching of the Bible in the large majority of them. We are merely animadverting on the claim put in that the method pursued in this volume has some distinguishing right to the name of 'inductive.' That it certainly has not... Any appreciative estimate of the book must proceed on the clear recognition of this fact. If we are to regard it as a contribution to dogmatics, we must needs look upon it as moving over the surface of its subject – as incomplete, insufficient and occasionally erroneous. If, on the other hand, we may accept it for what it is – a series of thoughtful Bible-readings on selected doctrinal subjects, including especially the topics of the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit – we may gladly recognize it as an admirable example of an admirable method of teaching, from which we may all learn much. Of course the limitations of its method characterize it: and of course the limitations inherent in the author's equipment and doctrinal views condition it. Even in his Bible-readings, naturally, Mr. Torrey still teaches his Arminianizing theory of redemption, and his Keswick doctrine of the Baptism of the Spirit, as well as his burning, evangelical blood-theology. As is also, perhaps, natural in Bible-readings, his exposition runs much on the surface of things and is rather external and at points even shallow." As cited in *The Princeton Theology 1812-1921* ed. M.A. Noll (Baker, 1983), p. 300.

⁵ John R. W. Stott, *The Preacher's Portrait: Some New Testament Word Studies* (Eerdmans, 1961), p. 28.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Shane Rosenthal, "Reflecting Upon Scripture: You're So Vain, You Probably Think This Text Is About You," *Modern Reformation* (Vol. 19, No. 5, Sept/Oct 2010), p. 25.