

**A sermon written and delivered by Bob Bledsoe  
at the Unitarian Society of Menomonie,  
Menomonie, WI 54751  
April 2005**

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### **WHAT ON EARTH AM I HERE FOR?**

You might recognize the title of my sermon this week. It's the subtitle of a best selling book, *The Purpose-Driven Life*, by Rick Warren. This book, dubbed by Warren an "anti-self-help" book, has been on the *New York Times* Hardcover Bestseller lists continuously since late January 2003, about six months after publication. According to *Time* magazine, Warren has sold over twenty-two million copies and been translated into twenty-eight languages.

About a month ago there was a story in the news over the course of several days. Brian Nichols, a suspect being tried on charges of rape and false imprisonment, had had his handcuffs removed prior to being led into an Atlanta courtroom. He struggled with his guard, managed to overpower her and take her gun from a lockbox where it had been stored, killed three people including the judge on his case, and escaped. There was a massive manhunt conducted in Atlanta for the next twenty-six hours, during which time Nichols tried robbing a couple and killed an immigration agent working on his new home, taking with him the agent's gun, badge and truck.

Here's where the story takes a quite fateful and almost unbelievable turn. Eventually, Brian Nichols took a young mother, Ashley Smith, hostage in her apartment. According to Smith, he initially bound her hands and feet with masking tape, a curtain

and electrical cord, then covered her head with a towel while he showered and changed clothes. “He said, ‘I’m not going to hurt you if you just do what I say. I don’t want to hurt you. I don’t want to hurt anybody else,’” according to Smith. Smith’s husband had been murdered in 2001 in a case which remains unsolved. Smith’s daughter lives with her aunt elsewhere, so there wasn’t a point at which she was in danger. Apparently at her initiation, they began talking about religion and family. Nichols removed Smith’s bonds and she showed him family photos and read to him from *The Purpose Driven Life*. She eventually followed Nichols in her car while he hid the stolen truck and then returned with him to her apartment. She says he did not have a weapon during that trip and she had a cell phone but did not use it. She made him a pancake breakfast while they watched the television coverage of his own manhunt.

At 10 o’clock the next morning, Nichols allowed her to leave to visit her daughter at her aunt’s home, giving her money and saying he would stay with her for a few days. Smith called 911 and police cordoned off the apartment building, sent in a SWAT team, and, after several tense minutes, Nichols emerged from the building, waving a white shirt. He was taken into custody without a struggle. Both Smith and Nichols have credited their conversations about religion and her reading from *The Purpose Driven Life* with his ultimate decision to surrender peacefully.

Our secular humanist rationale may let us look on this situation and say, perhaps a bit condescendingly, “well, of course. She lost her husband in a vicious manner years before, naturally she takes refuge in a book that posits a reason for his death and her life. And he is a black man in Georgia, the first loop on the Bible Belt, he was likely steeped

in the Baptist church and the two of them spoke much the same language. Plus, he was looking for a way out of this mess he'd got himself into alive. Storybook ending.”

I don't have any facts to counter any of that. I submit it goes much deeper.

Let me tell you a little about the book. It comprises a 40-day course of Biblical study, presenting what Warren considers the five biblical principles of a fulfilled life: [worship](#), [community](#), [discipleship](#), [ministry](#), and [evangelism](#). It's intended to be read as a [devotional](#), with each of forty short chapters read on consecutive days. Each chapter contains a brief at the end with a 'point to ponder', a verse to meditate on, and a question to consider over the course of the day. The first sentence of the book reads, “It's not about you,” and the remainder of the book explains that the quest for personal fulfillment, satisfaction, and even the otherwise godly desire for the 'abundant life' promised in the New Testament, must be secondary to the purpose of our existence on earth: to bring glory to God.

Now this has become a big, important book, especially among fundamentalist Christians. Beginning September of 2004, churches across America participated in a "Purpose Driven Life" campaign that brought Rick Warren to national media attention. I've been reading this book for a while now—I read these things so you don't have to—and I'm here to report to you that it's not as bad as you may think.

Don't get me wrong. It is deeply offensive in Warren's insistence, not that Christianity is an answer to life's questions, but that it is the only answer, and moreover specifically that Rick Warren's interpretation of Christianity, heavily versed in literalism, predestination, and the idea of absolute punishment unless exact measures are taken by poor, weak vessels such as ourselves, is itself the only sane response to his stated

question, “What on earth am I here for?” His answer, encapsulated in the title of the section beginning with chapter eight, is that you are here for God’s pleasure. My wife, Jayne, who is strong in her Christian faith and even more comfortable with, shall we say, the traditional forms of Jesus talk, is deeply offended by this book, and only made it through the first couple chapters before she threw it down, saying, “well, I’m glad I didn’t pay for that.”

In contrast, my wife’s cousin, a woman I not only love but respect and admire greatly, loves this book. She wants to live her life by its precepts and its lessons. My wife’s cousin is not a stupid, gullible woman. Trained as a scientist, I know her to be skeptical, slow to judgment, thorough in her research. We’ve had many long, drunken, late-night conversations about life and spirituality over the years, and I know she is not someone to get immersed into a fad.

How, then, can I reconcile this woman I love and respect, with whom I’ve had meaningful, metaphysical conversations, who can beat me at Scrabble and Trivial Pursuit, with the woman who enthuses over a book Wal-Mart stocks literally by the pound?

She loves this book and she pressed it on me, not as something that would change my life or save my soul, but as a book I needed to read in order to understand something that is going on in the American zeitgeist. I suspect she appreciates Rick Warren’s declarations for about the same reason I appreciate conspiracies about the Freemasons and the Trilateral Commission: in this world of sudden deaths, tsunamis, two hundred pound chunks of airplane falling from the sky, rapists and murderers who take us hostage

in our own homes, ever-rising gas prices, and Republican/Religious Right inspired legislation, it's a blessing to think somewhere, someone is in charge.

But I am here to tell you that Rick Warren is right. Not that his god is the only god or is an awesome god that trumps all thought and all questioning and all resistance. Warren himself would probably be offended at why I think he's right, because I think he's right even though he's wrong. It's his greater message, that we each have need of a purpose to make our lives meaningful, I emphasize, that makes him right. That point could be made using Allah, Yahweh, Krishna, Buddha, whoever we want to point to, or we could make the point with no one if we want to point at no one and only point out at the emptiness beyond us.

We need to do with Rick Warren and with this message and with the messages of other evangelicals and fundamentalists of all stripes—Christian, Muslim, Zoroastrian, whoever—what we have done with the song we sang today. Reinterpret their message and put it into our terms.

You doubtless recognized the song we sang, but not in its newer, UU version, because with the exception of Jill Smith, none of us grew up singing that version, but we sang the original, martial, war-loving “Onward Christian Soldiers.” Doubtless, too, you don't remember all the words. Here they are.

Onward, Christian soldiers, marching as to war,  
With the cross of Jesus going on before.  
Christ, the royal Master, leads against the foe;  
Forward into battle see His banners go!

At the sign of triumph Satan's host doth flee;  
On then, Christian soldiers, on to victory!  
Hell's foundations quiver at the shout of praise;  
Brothers lift your voices, loud your anthems raise.

Like a mighty army moves the church of God;  
Brothers, we are treading where the saints have trod.  
We are not divided, all one body we,  
One in hope and doctrine, one in charity.

What the saints established that I hold for true.  
What the saints believèd, that I believe too.  
Long as earth endureth, men the faith will hold,  
Kingdoms, nations, empires, in destruction rolled.

Crowns and thrones may perish, kingdoms rise and wane,  
But the church of Jesus constant will remain.  
Gates of hell can never gainst that church prevail;  
We have Christ's own promise, and that cannot fail.

Onward then, ye people, join our happy throng,  
Blend with ours your voices in the triumph song.  
Glory, laud and honor unto Christ the King,  
This through countless ages men and angels sing.

The tune is to “St. Gertrude,” written in 1871 by Sir Arthur Sullivan, the same Sir Arthur Sullivan of “Gilbert and” fame. The words were written by an Anglican priest, Sabine Baring-Gould, in 1865. He wrote not only this and other hymns but well over 100 books, including thirty novels and a sixteen-volume *Lives of the Saints*. Of this, his best-known work, he once wrote:

One Whit-Monday, thirty years ago, it was arranged that our school should join forces with that of a neighboring village. I wanted the children to sing when marching from one village to another, but couldn't think of anything quite suitable; so I sat up at night, resolved that I would write something myself. “Onward, Christian Soldiers” was the result. It was written in great haste, and I am afraid some of the rhymes are faulty.

I hasten to agree and it's probably not to be lamented that, so far as I can find, none of his works except this hymn and a few others are in print any longer.

But “Onward Christian Soldiers,” for all its faults—both literary and theological, and there are many—is a good, strong tune. It's martial, it gets your blood moving, your feet marching, gives you a sense of righteousness and makes you feel certain in what it is

you're doing. I remember being about ten and attending Vacation Bible School at a local church, and we started every class marching into church singing that hymn. "Onward Christian Soldiers" can lead you out the door and doing things. "Forward Through the Ages," the version we sing in this church, was written by Frederick Lucian Hosmer, a scholar of "church hymnody," in 1908 while he was minister at First Unitarian Church of Berkeley, CA. It is all those things, plus has the benefit of good content.

If there's a single Christian concept which I enclose in my own belief system, it's the gift of redemption, the idea that even the worst of us can be bettered, given second, third, innumerable chances. I want to believe that, if there is a heaven, Hitler is there, Stalin is there, child rapists and the daily practitioners of a casual, thoughtless cruelty are there, along with Jesus and Buddha and Mohammed and, dare I say it, me. What better sign of the possibility of redemption than that the worst of us joins the best of us? In his play, *Happy Birthday, Wanda June*, Kurt Vonnegut can't quite bring himself to present a redeemed Hitler, but he presents a heaven where not only the innocent dead girl Wanda June is sent, but also the banally, casually murderous commandant of a Nazi death camp. This fellow points out that, in heaven, Jesus is just another guy playing shuffleboard. I love that image. In that spirit, let us redeem Warren's book.

In *Genesis* chapter two the author ascribes creation to god in one week's time, and so Warren divides his major initial precepts over the course of seven days. Here they are.

1. It's not about you. To quote Warren, "God is not just the starting point of your life, he is the source of it. To discover your purpose in life you must turn to God's word, not the world's wisdom."
2. I am not an accident. Quoting Warren: "While there are illegitimate parents, there are no illegitimate children. Many children are unplanned by their parents, but they are not unplanned by God. God's purpose took into account human error, and even sin. God never does anything accidentally and he never makes mistakes."

3. Living on purpose is the path to peace. Warren further breaks this idea down into five benefits: knowing your purpose gives meaning to your life; knowing your purpose simplifies your life; knowing your purpose focuses your life; knowing your purpose motivates your life; and knowing your purpose prepares you for eternity.
4. There is more to life than just here and now. Warren quotes C.S. Lewis, who says, “There are two kinds of people: those who say to God ‘Thy will be done’ and those to whom God says, ‘All right then, have it your way.’” “When you fully comprehend that there is more to life...and you realize that life is just preparation for eternity, you will begin to live differently. You will start living in light of eternity, and that will color how you handle every relationship, task and circumstance.”
5. Life is a test and a trust. Warren says god tests everyone all the time, and the Bible is full of people who failed God’s tests: Adam and Eve, David, Hezekiah. But, he continues, “When you understand that life is a test, you realize that nothing is insignificant in your life...Every day is an important day, and every second is a growth opportunity to deepen your character, to demonstrate love, or to depend on God.” That life is a trust he ascribes to god’s giving us stewardship of the earth. He says, “The first job God gave humans was to manage and take care of God’s ‘stuff’ on earth. This role has never been rescinded...Everything we enjoy is to be treated as a trust that God has placed in our hands.”
6. This world is not my home. Warren quotes David: “Lord, help me to realize how brief my time on earth will be. Help me to know that I am here for but a moment more.” He says, “We are Christ’s ambassadors...God is very blunt about the danger of living for the here and now and adopting the values, priorities, and lifestyles of the world around us. When we flirt with the temptations of this world, God calls it spiritual adultery.”
7. It’s all for him. The number five is very important to Warren, and he enumerates five ways of honoring god: we bring God glory by worshipping him; we bring god glory by loving other believers; we bring god glory by becoming like Christ; we bring god glory by serving others with our gifts; and, we bring god glory by telling others about him.

To be honest, I don’t find all these ideas repulsive. In fact, I even agree with a couple of them. But I take issue with most. For instance, right off the bat, it scrapes against my reason and my entire experience of life to believe that, of the thousands of holy and learned texts there are in the world, all the answers to all the questions I have can be found in a single, flawed, multiply-translated book. If I were to accept that there is a single book whose answers today are unequivocally the answers god dictated to men in the distant past, I would accept the Koran, which itself says is immoral to translate into

any other language, including modern Arabic. This book demands you learn a new language to find god, that you come to god rather than god coming to you.

Also, number 6: “This world is not my home.” Too often, Warren and others like him see the world as existing for the development exclusively of Christians, much like the old libel against liberals that we see other people’s misfortunes as our opportunities to meddle and feel better about ourselves. It strikes me, too, that this rubs painfully against the second part of number 5, that the earth is given in stewardship to us. If we aren’t at home, and it really isn’t anyone’s home, why would we treat it as a precious thing? Too often, this type of thinking leads to rape of the land, extraction of resources without any return, chemicals poured down municipal drainpipes.

And yet. There are some ideas I think bear our agreement. Number two, that “I am not an accident”—Buddhists have a story that there is a world which is one great ocean, and on that ocean is a single hoop floating on the waves. There is a single tortoise which buries herself in the muck at the bottom of the ocean and once every thousand years she crawls out of the slime and swims slowly and methodically for the surface for a single gulp of air. The same chance that tortoise happens to pop her head directly in the center of that hoop is the same chance we have of being born. I can accept that I am not an accident, that I am alive for a purpose. I merely disagree with Warren about what that purpose is.

And to speak again of stewardship: I think it is absolutely imperative that we treat the earth and each other as precious, irreplaceable beings and objects. All we need do to recognize the beauty of what we have is to look out on a crisp spring morning and note the blades of grass struggling greenly through the cracks of sidewalks and out of the

tufts birds have deposited on buildings. Despite our best attempts, and some people and governments give it a good try, we cannot eradicate those green, growing things; they were here before us, they will be here when we're gone.

So I want to redeem Warren's list. There are ideas in it I'd like to keep and ones I'd like to change. Here is my revised list:

1. It's about others. I'm comfortable with the notion that I'm not the center of attention, but rather than directing it to something I can't see or even trust exists, I should devote my love at those whose benefit I can affect. I can work for them, smile at them, be stern when it's in their best interests, and catalogue the myriad ways I can love them.
2. I will keep Warren's wording, with this codicil: that if I am not an accident, then I must act in ways that honor that. I mustn't treat other people as if they were accidents, either.
3. I would keep Warren's words here, too: "Living on purpose is the path to peace." I take issue with his notions of purpose—mine for instance involve acting purposefully, not simply storing up good karma for eternity—but I can't argue with his choice of words.
4. "Life may be more than here and now—and I can't know at this point, even with all the thought and effort I've put into it—but what is important is how I behave in the here and now." There is no room for me to bank up good behavior only to say, if I cut someone off in traffic or give him the finger because he cut me off, "well, I'm usually a good person." In my view, we have only this moment to be a good person.
5. I don't agree with Warren that life is a test, but I do agree life is a trust. Hence, I'd modify his fifth precept, with all its suggestions, to simply, "Life is a trust."
6. *Pace* Warren, I am at home in the world. I love it for all that it is. I rejoice in getting up in the morning and going to bed at night, I love the feel of rain against my face and the smell of wood burning. I exult in the crush of humanity, the sour-faced people who get in my way and frustrate my hopes, the death-masks of children swept back on the incoming tides in Indonesia, even now, four months after its tsunami. There may be another world, a better world, but for now this is all I have and like Walt Whitman, I am mad to embrace it.
7. This is a repetition of the first point, because it is so important it needs to be said twice: "It's about others." I need to be aware of other people every moment. It may be that in that crush of humanity, in our coming together as a community—and I'm talking here about more than this spiritual community, more than Menomonie, more than worshipping together—we are god. Some theologians posit that god created people so he could talk to himself. I would argue that if we were created, it's because god could not do everything on his own. We are here to help one another, through which we help god, through which we help ourselves.

This, then, is how I would redeem Warren's Purpose Driven Life. Like Hosmer's revision of Baring-Gould, changing a song celebrating militarism and cruelty to reflect peaceful resolution, I would take this popular diatribe celebrating exclusivity and self-righteousness and revise him to reflect inclusivity and attention outward to other people. I urge you now to provide some suggestions of your own.