

Putting on the Character of Christ

What is your purpose in life? How will you know if you have achieved it?

When American Pastor Rick Warren released his book, *“The Purpose-Driven Life”* it became an instant success around the English-speaking world. Friends emailed me from the USA, the Middle East and New Zealand to say that the book was being used locally as a text in Bible study groups. It quickly climbed to the top of the list of English-language book charts and was featured positively in TIME magazine. Many people in our church read the text in home group situations. It was practical, stimulating and easy to read.

Why the Purpose-Driven Life?

Why was *“The Purpose-Driven Life”* so popular? Frankly, it did not contain startling new revelations or deep truths previously unknown to people who had been Christians for any length of time. What it did do, however, was re-focus attention on knowing who we are, why we are here, what God expects of us and how not to get to the end of our lives “regretting”. Life is too short to be spent on the pursuit of trivia, or bemoaning failure. A good friend of mine tells me he does not want to reach the end of his life wishing he had spent more time in the office. Most of us want to feel our journey has been worthwhile and will have a lasting impact, a legacy for our having briefly passed this way.

The challenge for Christians in a busy world is to attune our ears and senses, so that we can hear the Voice of God above the ever-increasing levels of static and aural interference. There are many voices, many opinions, hosts of experts attempting to get our attention and set standards and objectives for our lives. Some are basically good people. They love us and their intentions are noble. We can trust them. Others are just “impossible”. No matter what we do we can’t please them. Their standards are too high. What’s more, they keep raising the bar, making it harder for us to measure up. They do not brook disagreement and they make us feel we continually disappoint them – and God as well. The secret of a happy life is to know we please those who matter. As Christians, our Heavenly Father matters the most.

I recently looked at a list of resources to get a feel for what is available to help Christians today deal with the complex issue of directing their lives. Frankly, I was stunned. There is a lot of good material around. However, amid the gems there is also an abundance of stereotypes, texts such as *“Holiness in 30 Mins a Day”*, *“Testimonies of Ten Contemporary Saints”*, *“Christian Character for Dummies”*. One was labeled *“7 Simple Steps to Perfection”*.⁵

After years of practice I’ll admit I still find it hard to be the sanctified Christian, model husband, exemplary father, model citizen and corporate player on the catwalk of contemporary opinion. I confess it has been a lot more than “seven simple steps”. That sounds so much like a recipe; I find the ingredients get mixed up too early to be of much earthly use. Just when I feel I have made it, the mess boils over and I am left cleaning up a mess. I didn’t buy the book – it promised so much, but I felt so limited!

I admire contemporary saints, great men and women of God, who show amazing commitment and have outstanding testimonies. They stand out, but I often fail. I feel like a spiritual pygmy standing beside them. At that moment, the Holy Spirit comes along to (quietly) remind me that it is not people I am supposed to be admiring and following, but Jesus Christ. I am to be like him. When people look at me, it is Jesus' character that is supposed to show through. Discipleship is modeled on Him.

Doing versus being

In our Christian culture, we often begin with "doing" words. We are very verbal people. We talk about "serving God, reading the Bible, praying, attending church meetings, resisting Satan, overcoming temptations, witnessing, engaging in spiritual warfare, living in obedience to our Heavenly Father." Serving, reading, praying, attending, resisting, overcoming, witnessing, engaging, living. All doing words. All concepts that make it sound as though success in the Christian life depends predominantly on our actions. Perhaps we have got the whole frame back to front. We act as though the faith walk is regulatory, predictable, compliant, like a great spiritual sausage machine. Put the ingredients in at the front, close the door, set the dials and all the saintly sausages will come out at the other end, in the same shape and with a common texture.

Human religion *is* invariably regulatory. Islam, Judaism, Jehovah's Witnesses, Hinduism all stress compliance and actions. The Christian life is not about regulation of our operating environment or external behaviour; it is predicated on relationship – with God. Centuries of religious, educational and moralistic efforts to control people have proven futile. Jesus was non-compliant; when the religious leaders challenged him to observe external ritual to be ceremonially clean, he turned the argument around, saying that evil came from the human heart, not what others see. They were offended, because he did not match their religious skill sets (Matthew 15:1-20). Real change occurs on the inside and is a supernatural work of God. The Christian faith is not posited on regulation and rigid regimentation but relationship.

Jesus said, "Learn from me" (Matthew 11:29). Something arresting about that simple text suggests that Jesus was not talking about "doing words", complying with a legal framework, fitting into moulds, acting for spectators like performing seals, but grafting character that's Godly and grows wholly and solely out of intimacy with Him. For Jesus, the Christian life was not about rules and compliance but renewal and power.

The Apostle James told the people of his day who stressed rules that failing just one of God's requirements was as bad as failing the lot (James 2:10). In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus told his listeners that unless their righteousness exceeded the actions of the pious, knowledgeable, religious leaders, they would not get to heaven (Matthew 5:20). In Paul's day, the dominant culture of some Christians was, "touch not, taste not, handle not", consuming much energy and emotions on unimportant things, as though they really mattered.

However, what really counted (and still does) was the presence of the Holy Spirit and the power of God that raised Jesus from the dead, at work in our

lives, encouraging, supporting and invigorating us. Paul's letter to the Galatian Christians teaches that if we try to keep God's laws and please him in our own efforts, we are bound to fail again and again (Galatians 3:10-14). Conversely, when the Holy Spirit is at work, he transforms ordinary people into extraordinary Christians. If we live by regulation, we will fall into binding condemnation. If we live by the Spirit, we will be free. There is no other way! (Read Ephesians 4:15; John 13:15a, 1 Peter 2:21b.)

Imitating Christ

The Bible teaches that Jesus was human and that he was tempted like us. He left us an example, that we should follow in his steps.

Charles Sheldon wrote a best-selling Christian novel with the challenging title, *"In His Steps"*. The characters in the book (a local church) accepted a challenge to live every day as Jesus would have lived, had he attended their school, been employed in their work place or lived in their homes. "What would Jesus do?" became the standard. Discipleship, not duties, became the basis on which people made key decisions. A generation of Christians read the book and were challenged to live like Christ, in his power instead of their own.

Roman Catholic theologian Thomas a Kempis (1379-1471) presented a similar challenge in his best selling work, *"The Imitation of Christ"*. The author had a wide knowledge of the Scriptures and classical philosophy, but this did not satisfy him. He became convinced about man's complete dependence on God's love and the futility of life without Him. It is said that he often broke off conversations with his friends to rush back to his cell in the monastery so that he could talk to God. Thomas a Kempis wanted, above all else, to know Jesus and be like him, to "imitate" him. As a result, the book has exercised a profound influence for more than 500 years. Can we live like Jesus? The writers of the Bible and Christian heroes down through the ages would respond, "Can we not?"

The popular 2004 Mel Gibson motion picture *"The Passion of the Christ"* showed the suffering of Jesus in graphic detail that drew millions of viewers and catapulted this sometimes misunderstood movie into global record figures. Millions were confronted with the suffering of Jesus for them. But there is another issue: who really wants to go all the way with Jesus, if it involves suffering? There is no short-cut. True discipleship involves going all the way.

Following the Plan

When I was a small boy my parents gave me two sets of Meccano. The concept behind Meccano (a hobby construction set, first patented by Frank Hornby in 1901) was that children would learn to follow exploded diagrams and make cars, planes, robots, anything really, with nuts, bolts, girders, brackets, pulleys, levels, string, rods and metal strips that came in the box. Boys who got lucky were given engines to fit into the Meccano, so that cranes would lift weights or cars move forward at the push of a button. I played with them for hours at a time. The most difficult element was understanding the plan. If you have ever built a model from a plan, you will know it is not easy. Our master

plan is the Bible; the planner is Jesus. Following his strategy will allow us to develop his character.

It is not easy to work from a plan to put together the building blocks of Christian character. It is not easy to live like Jesus. We sometimes fantasize, “If Jesus were my husband, my boss, my pastor, my child, life would be easier. I wouldn’t lose my temper. I’d be kind all the time. I would think before opening my mouth. I’d know how to go the second mile, turn the other cheek to my neighbours, not get upset. Imagine if Jesus were my Member of Parliament or my parent.” However, fantasy is just that; it usually doesn’t work in practice.

How would Jesus have reacted to the problems we face? We are all confronted with pressures, stressors and decisions that weren’t even considered in New Testament times, such as stem cell research, GM foods, international terrorism, post-modernism, the pervading culture of religious indifference, euthanasia, chemical and biological debates, AIDS, green issues and the break-down of family values? Regardless, in any generation, Jesus’ response would have been same: “I do what pleases Father”. The Holy Spirit is in us and with us, to show us how.” “In” implies presence and power; “with” indicates as a constant companion, to show us how to live. He is the Master Planner. He can make all the pieces fit.

Making a difference

If we abide in Him, draw on His power and wisdom, grow in grace, wisdom & strength and live differently, he will help us. Jesus said, “Without me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). That is why the Holy Spirit came, to transform our minds, attitudes, reactions, likes or dislikes, prejudices and responses to problems and bring about supernatural and lasting change. When he is allowed to do his work, he nurtures Christians into a practical lifestyle that pleases the Father, one that is not curriculum-based, but person-centred, a process, not a program, using supernatural spiritual resources, not manuals.

Donatus lived in the third century. Watching the impact the new sect called Christians were having on the Roman Empire he wrote to his good friend Cyprian, who lived in Carthage on the North African coast. Cyprian sent him a letter that changed his life.

“It is a bad world, Donatus, an incredibly bad world. But I have discovered in the midst of it a quiet and holy people who have learned a great secret. They have found a joy which is a thousand times better than any of the pleasures of our sinful life. They are despised and persecuted, but they care not. They are masters of their souls. They have overcome the world. These people, Donatus, are Christians, and I am one of them.”

If we want to make a difference in this world, the key is responding in obedience and faith to the call and direction of the Holy Spirit. Pray, “Lord, teach me how to live & glorify you in life of worship. Help me to become the man or woman God called me to be.”