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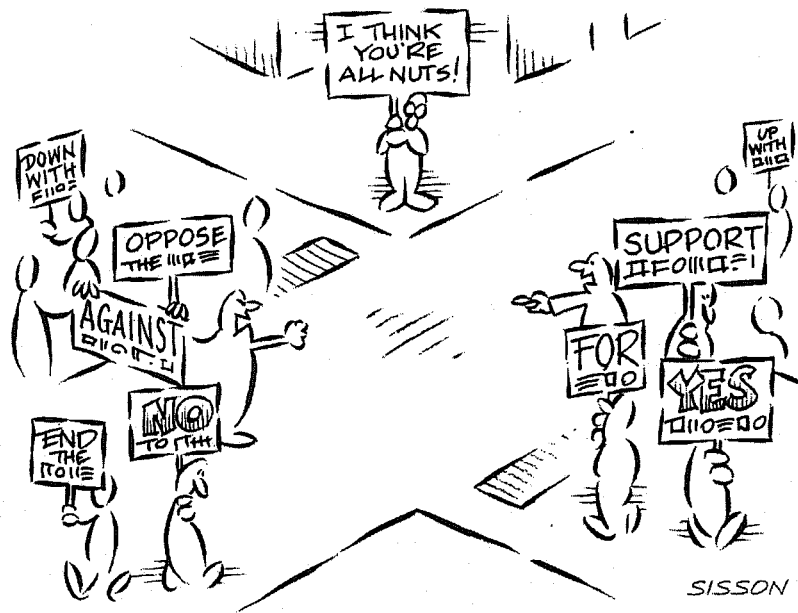
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*Whose Purpose, Whose Drive?  
Thinking Teleologically  
About Purpose-Drivenness*



*Jonathan R. Wilson*



The astounding success of the purpose-driven phenomenon is well-known to readers of this journal. That success is marked by millions of books sold, thousands of people participating in study groups, hundreds of leaders participating in conferences, and scores of stories in the mainstream media. Many of these testify to lives transformed by their encounter with "purpose-drivenness."<sup>1</sup>

In the face of such success and testimonies, is it possible to criticize the phenomenon? Of course it is possible. Is it wise? Can it be effective? Yes, I believe that criticism is not only wise but necessary. Sometimes evangelicals can criticize too readily and too pedantically. Indeed, my own tendency is to look for what is good and encourage it. But when something has the effect that purpose-drivenness is having, even its supporters must take great care with its power. Success and popularity do not necessarily signify faithfulness—or unfaithfulness.

Therefore, critical reflection on "purpose-drivenness" is crucial to the health of the church's witness to the gospel and making disciples. But it must be done with care, grace, and sensitivity to the difficulties inherent in criticizing such a phenomenon. I can easily imagine offering a criticism that delights those who are already opposed to the movement on a variety of grounds. I can also imagine offering a criticism that offers some negative observations but that, on the whole,

concludes with a positive evaluation. The first approach would comfort the opposition with criticisms rooted in shared convictions. The second approach would comfort supporters of purpose-drivenness with the appearance of critical reflection that leaves the movement untouched.

Neither of these approaches satisfies me. Both simply trade on the different strands within the evangelical church. By doing so, they leave the boundaries between groups untouched and identities undisturbed. They are merely the reassertion of group identities masquerading as critical reflection and argument. Something different is needed if we are to recognize the possible threat to evangelical faithfulness in North America that is revealed by the popularity of purpose-drivenness. Let me say it clearly: the purpose-driven phenomenon is not the great threat to faithful witness to the gospel. But its popularity is symptomatic of the vulnerability of North American Christianity. And that vulnerability threatens faithful witness to the gospel.

This complex claim will take some time to develop. I will begin with some reflections on my affinities with purpose-drivenness. Then I will draw on the work of Alasdair MacIntyre to set the context for understanding the vulnerability of North American evangelicalism. After this, I will return to the purpose-driven phenomenon to bring the entire argument to a point.

With this approach I hope to show not only the vulnerability of North American evangelicals, but also why purpose-drivenness has been so successful. It is not enough to criticize various elements of the phenomenon, whether they be doctrinal, ecclesiastical, or practical.<sup>2</sup> The need in our present circumstances is more radical than simply modifying or even rejecting a particular program. We must go further, to understand the deeper significance of the phenomenon in order to seek a more radical repentance.

#### PURPOSE DRIVENNESS AND *TELOS*

As the purpose-driven phenomenon was becoming more successful and visible, I observed it with hope and fear. Even

before I read the material, I found myself hoping that it was a clear, simple, and accessible presentation of an argument and program that I had already been pursuing for several years. During the six years that I pastored a small Baptist church in Vancouver, British Columbia, I read the work of Alasdair MacIntyre and found it illuminating for my own situation and ministry.<sup>3</sup> After six years in ministry, I studied for a PhD at Duke University. There I encountered once again the work of MacIntyre and deepened my engagement with it in conversation with professors and other students.<sup>4</sup> That interest eventually led to a book on MacIntyre and the church,<sup>5</sup> and the use throughout my work of what I have learned from MacIntyre.

In the next section of this article I will draw on MacIntyre's work in detail. In this section it is sufficient to note that MacIntyre convinced me of the desperate need in our culture to recover a sense of *telos*. *Telos* may rightly be translated "purpose." Its recovery is necessary because we have lost in our culture the sense that things have "purposes." Now it is very important to understand what MacIntyre means by purpose in this sense. He is drawing on an ancient tradition that recognizes that the purpose (*telos*) of something is given in its very nature. For Christians, *telos* is rooted in our belief in God as Creator and Redeemer. The recovery of thinking teleologically, that is, thinking of something in light of its *telos*, is to understand things in light of the end for which God creates them.

An essential part of this recovery of teleology is the recovery as well of life lived teleologically, that is, life lived in light of the purpose for which God creates us. Thus, the recovery of the sense of *telos* properly leads to an intentional conformity to that *telos* in our lives. This recovery is critical to the church's witness to the gospel and living in faithfulness to the gospel today, because we live in the midst of a culture that is defined by the conviction that we are free to decide our own purpose in life. For our culture, there is no such thing as a *telos* given to us in our nature, unless it is the ultimately non-teleological conviction that our purpose is to determine our own preferred end. In this sense, we believe that we are our own creators.

Over against this dominant cultural characteristic, I found in MacIntyre the resources for understanding our condition, our distance from the gospel, obstacles to overcoming that distance, and some ways to return to faithfulness. Given all of this, I was very hopeful that purpose-drivenness would be an intentional or unintentional recovery of teleological thinking made accessible to large numbers of people. But I was also fearful that it would fall short, because I know how hard it is to recover teleology in our present circumstances. After reading the "purpose-driven" books and reflecting on them at length, I have concluded that my fears rather than my hopes have been fulfilled in the phenomenon.<sup>6</sup> To see why I have come to this conclusion, I must give more attention to MacIntyre's work.

#### LIVING WITH FRAGMENTS

To understand the mistake that the purpose-driven phenomenon reveals to us, our analysis must go beyond the presentations of *The Purpose-Driven Church* and *The Purpose-Driven Life*. My concern here is not with the content of these books, though that too may be criticized. Rather, my deeper concern is with the context and the failure of the purpose-driven phenomenon to challenge that context with a call to radical discipleship. Thus, our analysis must go to the very roots of our present cultural context. That cultural context is difficult, almost impossible, to point to because of its very nature. In MacIntyre's *After Virtue*, he resorts to a parable to help us identify the circumstances in which we find ourselves. These circumstances are so familiar to us that they are very nearly "the air that we breathe" and "the water in which we swim." In other words they are so much "the way things are" that we have great difficulty thinking that things could be otherwise. This situation is so determinative for our way of thinking and for what is wrong with purpose-drivenness that I will quote MacIntyre's parable at length in order to lay the foundation for my criticism:

Imagine that the natural sciences were to suffer the effects of a catastrophe. A series of environmental disasters are blamed by

the general public on the scientists. Widespread riots occur, laboratories are burnt down, physicists are lynched, books and instruments are destroyed. Finally, a Know-Nothing political movement takes power and successfully abolishes science teaching in schools and universities, imprisoning and executing the remaining scientists. Later still there is a reaction against this destructive movement and enlightened people seek to revive science, although they have largely forgotten what it was. But all they possess are fragments; a knowledge of experiments detached from any knowledge of the theoretical context which gave them significance; parts of theories unrelated either to the other bits and pieces of theory which they possess or to experiment; instruments whose use has been forgotten; half-chapters from books, single pages from articles, not always fully legible because torn and charred. None the less, all these fragments are reembodyed in a set of practices which go under the revived names of physics, chemistry, and biology. Adults argue with each other about the respective merits of relativity theory, evolutionary theory, and phlogiston theory, although they possess only a very partial knowledge of each. Children learn by heart the surviving portions of the periodic table and recite as incantations some of the theorems of Euclid. Nobody, or almost nobody, realises that what they are doing is not natural science in any proper sense at all. For everything that they do and say conforms to certain canons of consistency and coherence and those contexts which would be needed to understand what they are doing have been lost, perhaps irretrievably.<sup>7</sup>

Building on this imaginary scenario, MacIntyre argues that

in the actual world which we inhabit the language of morality is in the same state of grave disorder as the language of natural science in the world which I described. What we possess, if this view is true, are the fragments of a conceptual scheme, parts of which now lack those contexts from which their significance derived. We possess indeed simulacra of morality, we continue to use many of the key expressions. But we have—very largely, if

not entirely—lost our comprehension, both theoretical and practical, of morality.<sup>8</sup>

The importance of this claim and MacIntyre's supporting arguments cannot be overstated, even though it is open to criticism.<sup>9</sup>

The most important modification to make in MacIntyre's account is to transfer his claims from the field of morality to Christianity. MacIntyre claims that the language and practice of morality has been fragmented to such an extent that we no longer have a coherent understanding and practice of morality. We have something that looks like morality: we can study it and analyze it. But we have only a semblance of morality, not its reality. I think that the same thing is true of Christianity. Our understanding and practice of discipleship resembles the real thing, but it is only a semblance, a second-rate copy of the real thing. We can teach the copy, we can live it, and we can analyze it. But we have profound difficulty perceiving its distance from real discipleship to Jesus Christ.

MacIntyre wrote *After Virtue* to demonstrate how far we are from a coherent understanding and practice of the moral life. It would take a similar tour de force to demonstrate my claim that we are far from a coherent understanding and practice of Christian discipleship. In the context of this article, I will simply let the claim stand as an assertion that will be immediately embraced by some, wrestled with by others, and rejected by still others. But I urge everyone reading this article who cares about faithfulness to the gospel in Christian discipleship, to reflect on the claim, its possible truth, and its illumination of our circumstances.<sup>10</sup>

This then is the context within which purpose-drivenness has flourished: a Christian community that has forgotten its *telos*—its end as given to it by the God who creates and redeems. And it is this context that enables the purpose-driven phenomenon to take on the appearance of recovering discipleship without actually doing so. What we actually have in the purpose-driven phenomenon is an account of the Christian life that falls short of recovering teleological living in

faithfulness to the gospel. It falls short because it fails to identify purpose as *telos*, it subordinates the church to the individual, it is driven rather than graced, and it promotes techniques rather than practices.

### THE FAULTS OF PURPOSE-DRIVENNESS

The faults I identified above are very significant. They explain why the phenomenon has been so popular and successful. They also provide us with some insight into how to work with the phenomenon in order to rebuild our understanding and practice of Christian discipleship. My critique is both radical in its attempt to get at the root of the problem and hopeful in its recognition that purpose-drivenness may be revised for good uses. Of course, if the problem is not recognized, then purpose-drivenness could lead tragically to our mistaken celebration of the recovery of Christian discipleship when, in fact, we have only recovered a semblance of the real thing. At that point, we could come very close to crying "peace, peace," or "faithfulness, faithfulness," where there is none.

### WHOSE PURPOSE?

The purpose-driven phenomenon falls short of the true recovery because it fails to recover purpose as *telos*. Of course, *The Purpose-Driven Life* famously begins, "It's not about you." Many pastors I have talked to tell me stories about people (men especially and interestingly) who have had their vision of life enlarged by their encounter with purpose-driven material. They spend more time with their families and more time concerned for their neighbors. These people (often, but not always, church members) have become better people and are living life more intentionally. They are less at the mercy of market forces and career ambitions.

But God does not want, and Christian discipleship does not intend, merely to make us better people who live more intentional lives. God's work in Christ calls us to be new people not better people. This newness of life in Christ, made possible by grace, radically transforms our lives. All of this

may be summed up in *telos*. Our *telos* is not something that we choose: it is given to us—by nature in some philosophical schemes, by grace in reality and revealed in Christ. Life in Christ is not one lifestyle option or better way to live; it is not finding my purpose. Life in Christ simply is life; anything else is death.

In our present cultural circumstances, *purpose* does not faithfully translate *telos*. "Finding my purpose," the language used throughout the purpose-driven material, today means "discovering how I want to live and taking steps to achieve that desire." In the gospel of Jesus Christ, *telos* means coming to recognize who made us and in whom there is redemption from sin, and doing those things that make us participants in that gift. The various activities and claims of *The Purpose-Driven Life* are not exactly wrong. They are fragments of the Christian life. For this reason, they appeal to many. But because the account is wrong at this fundamental level, it leads us to a semblance of Christian discipleship.

This fundamental flaw may help explain the popularity and success of purpose-drivenness that extends beyond the church. As one "witness" to success in the purpose-driven life has asserted, if one takes out the spiritual and religious material, the program still works. I think that this represents a fundamental distortion of the purpose-driven material, but it also reveals the fundamental flaw in the failure to assert the non-negotiable claims of Jesus Christ. At some points, the purpose-driven materials seem more like a program that has been successfully marketed than the gospel that has been faithfully declared. More critically, it could be seen as a self-help program overlaid with a veneer of spirituality. Again, I think that this description distorts the program, but it is an easy move to make because the fragmentation of our culture is unrecognized and the radical, teleological demands of the gospel are muted.

### WHOSE DRIVE?

Intertwined with the question of purpose is the question of drive. Because the purpose-driven phenomenon fails to

give an account of purpose that is teleologically rooted in the gospel of Jesus Christ, it falls into a cultural trap when it talks about drive. In our culture, "drive" and "being driven" are bound up with individual freedom and our belief that we should be able to achieve our heart's desire. In this scenario we imagine that we have available to us the resources and opportunities necessary to achieve our goals. It is only a slight exaggeration to say that if we fail to achieve, it is because we did not want it strongly enough or that we lacked the right method for achieving our ambition.

In this context, if we use the language of "being driven" in relation to the gospel and the Christian life, we run the danger of (mis)communicating the good news of salvation. When this dangerous use of "being driven" is accompanied by a failure to locate purpose clearly and carefully in the grace of the gospel, then Christianity is clearly miscommunicated and misrepresented as the method by which I can achieve my purpose in life. At this point, the opening assertion, "It's not about you," has been displaced by, "It's all about you." The only change that is accomplished by this understanding of purpose-drivenness is that I now think about myself in the context of a semblance of Christian discipleship. It's still about me, only I've learned some new ways of thinking about me and making myself happier.

### CONCLUSION

In another context, more of the doctrinal and practical content of the purpose-driven books could be criticized appropriately. But the more radical critique that I have presented here needs to be established as the framework for such additional and detailed critiques. At the same time, my critique illuminates some reasons for the reception that purpose-drivenness has been accorded. Finally, I hope that my critique may provide a beginning point for revising the application of purpose-driven materials in churches. The phenomenon will be with us for sometime, and it cannot be entirely avoided. If the critique that I offer here helps some pastors and churches to understand the attraction of purpose-drivenness and to

modify it in service to the radical claims of the gospel and discipleship, then the phenomenon may be redeemed by God's surprising grace to renew the church in North America.

#### Author

Dr. Jonathan R. Wilson is professor of theology and ethics at Acadia Divinity College, Wolfville, Nova Scotia. Among his books is *God So Loved the World: A Christology for Disciples* (Baker). His newest book is *Primer for Christian Doctrine* (Eerdmans, 2005) and Brazos Press will release a book this fall, tentatively titled *Practicing Church*. This is his first contribution to *Reformation & Revival Journal*.

#### Notes

1. I will use the awkward phrase "purpose-drivenness" to refer to the entire phenomenon, including, but not limited to, the books by Rick Warren.
2. Those criticisms may be important, but they are not enough. I myself have criticized the ecclesiology of *The Purpose-Driven Church* in *The Community of the Word: Evangelical Ecclesiologies*, ed. Mark A. Husbands and Daniel J. Treier (Downers Grove: IVP, 2005), ch. 3, "Practicing Church: Evangelical Ecclesiologies at the End of Modernity," 59–75.
3. The book that had the greatest impact on me was Alasdair MacIntyre's, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2d ed. (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984). The first edition (which I read) was published in 1981, the same year I began my pastorate. The second edition (cited above) will be referred to in all subsequent notes.
4. During this time, MacIntyre published another significant book: *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988). Among those to whom I am indebted are Stanley Hauerwas, Thomas Spragens, Jr., L. Gregory Jones, Michael Cartwright, and Mikael Broadway.
5. Jonathan R. Wilson, *Living Faithfully in a Fragmented World: Lessons for the Church from MacIntyre's "After Virtue"* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1997).
6. I am concerned here primarily with two books by Rick Warren: *The Purpose-Driven Church: Growth Without Compromising Your Message and Your Mission* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995); and *The Purpose-Driven Life: What On Earth Am I Here For?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002).
7. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 1.
8. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2.
9. John Horton and Susan Mendus, *After MacIntyre: Critical Perspectives on the Work of Alasdair MacIntyre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,

1994); John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990); Wilson, *Living Faithfully*, ch. 5.

10. With some hesitation—since I have not yet read the book—I note that Ronald J. Sider, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), may possibly provide some help here.