



Pastoral Malpractice and the Visible Church

By Bob DeWaay

Suppose you were to contract a potentially serious medical condition and went to see a doctor. Upon asking him details about the diagnosis and medical consequences you found out that he does not take medical literature literally. In addition, he has not kept up on the latest medical research and has been out of medical school for several decades. He prefers to make his patients happy and comfortable rather than to force them to confront the truth about their health condition. Would you see such a doctor? Neither would I. Such a doctor eventually could be found guilty of malpractice.

But consider this: The doctor who treats a body is dealing with something that is merely temporal. In a lesser-to-greater argument Jesus said, *“Do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell”* (**Matthew 10:28**). If, as the Scriptures assure us, our souls are more important than our bodies, why do people look to premier doctors to diagnose and treat their physical conditions but select a pastor who sidesteps truth when it comes to their eternal souls? That makes no sense. Apparently many do not truly believe that the condition of their souls is that important.

I thought about this after a recent trip to California, when I was able to speak to a member of Rick Warren’s Saddleback Church. The man was very angry with me for having written a book critical of Warren, and he explained that I had sinned by writing such a book. Rebutting his premise in an attempt to reason with him, I took him to the chapter in my book where I dealt with the mistreatment of Scripture. I pointed to the quote of Genesis 6:8 and asked if, as Warren states, he really believed that the passage was about how we can make God smile like Noah supposedly did.¹ In the book I claim that Genesis 6:8 states that Noah received grace from God, not that Noah gave God something. The man’s response? “Rick Warren is not always careful about how he uses the Scripture.” I failed to convince the man of my position but raised an important issue: how can some Christians think that what the Bible actually says is of such little importance that a pastor who misuses it is deemed to be doing what God wants, while another pastor who corrects the misuse is sinning? Clearly something is amiss.

I have assumed in Warren’s case that he indeed has the tools to perform sound exegesis. Some of the other leaders of large congregations—Bill Hybels, Robert Schuller, or Joel Osteen—likely are capable of doing sound Biblical exegesis and correctly applying the Bible to the lives of those who attend their churches. But sadly they often do not use sound exegesis—or even use the Bible as the main source of their messages. Never before in our history have we possessed better “diagnostic tools” to help us study the Bible. For example, the Logos Bible Software makes it possible for any English-speaking person to dig deeply into the meaning of Biblical passages. Why aren’t more pastors using these “tools”?

We can easily lay the blame at the feet of the seeker movement, whose main premise is that Christianity must be presented in such a way that potential seekers will see it as beneficial in terms of meeting their felt needs. Many important passages of the Bible, interpreted correctly, are not useful to attract seekers. In *The Purpose Driven Church*, Rick Warren explains:

You cannot switch back and forth between targeting seekers and believers in the same services. For example, don’t follow up a series on “Managing Stress” with “Expository Gems from Leviticus” or follow a series on “What God Thinks About Sex” with “Unmasking the Beast in Revelation.” You’ll create schizophrenic members, and no one will know when it’s safe to bring unchurched friends.ⁱⁱ

But this creates a noteworthy temptation to downplay the importance of expounding Scripture accurately. Seekers (i.e., those who are lost) have no hunger for the “pure milk of the Word” because they are not “newborn babes” and cannot “grow in respect to salvation” because they are, in fact, lost (see 1Peter 2:2). This means that the seeker-sensitive pastor has to “file down” the rough edges of Scripture for these seekers in order to make it appear to teach human wisdom about how to make life better. Thus Noah “makes God smile” rather than finds the grace to escape the horrible sin in which his world was caught up (according to the seeker-sensitive telling of the story). We are living in days like those of Noah (Matthew 24:37, 38), meaning that people are facing certain

and unexpected judgment. Only pastors who know and preach the Bible accurately have the means to warn them and help them find how to escape God's wrath.

Pastor Warren may be correct that you cannot do both—expound important Biblical topics and appear attractive to seekers at the same time. But I disagree completely with the idea that we must appear attractive to lost sinners. We need to preach Christ to lost sinners so that they can know the terms of the gospel. That is the only valid “diagnosis” that will do them any good. In the book of Acts this was done up front, and not through a back door after presenting an alternative that would seem attractive to people in their lost state.

The Bible does not give pastors the liberty to handle the Bible in a sloppy manner. Consider this passage: “*Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine*” (1 Timothy 5:17 NKJV). We must grant that people have various levels of skill. But every teacher of the Bible must labor to understand the passage under consideration. No amount of skill will make up for a lack of motivation.

The issue of motivation to develop the skills and use the tools to perform Biblical exegesis also has reached seminaries. Because of a growing lethargy concerning Biblical interpretation and sound doctrine, many have turned to such sidetracks as “marriage and family therapy” or deceptive mysticism such as “spiritual formation.” Young people from around the country have written us stating that they want to go into the ministry but cannot find a school where they can gain a solid theological education without being subjected to postmodernism, mysticism, the therapeutic gospel, or church growth theory. If many churches are not looking for those who “labor in word and doctrine,” seminaries have little market to train people to do just that. So we find ourselves in the lamentable situation where young people who want to be godly pastors trained with the tools to accurately handle the Bible have difficulty finding a place to be educated, and those who actually do find such an education have difficulty finding churches that want them. As a result, our evangelical movement has grown accustomed to pastoral malpractice as though it were the norm. Many seminaries are producing professional “people handlers” rather than theologians, and many churches like it that way. This is analogous to the situation in Jeremiah's day: “*The prophets prophesy falsely, And the priests rule on their*

own authority; And My people love it so! But what will you do at the end of it?”
(Jeremiah 5:31)

The standards are strict and generally well observed for those who treat our bodies and cure our physical ailments. But the standards for those who care for our souls have fallen woefully short. That this is so illustrates what little concern the visible church of the 21st century has for eternity. The Bible says, “*Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we shall incur a stricter judgment*” (**James 3:1**). There will be malpractice lawsuits against pastors, just as there are against doctors. But pastoral malpractice will be dealt with in *eternity*, making it even more serious. In the meantime, pray that God will raise up pastors who will take seriously their sacred duty to interpret and apply the Bible accurately—and pray for churches that want such pastors to lead them.ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱ I deal with that in *Redefining Christianity*; page 123-125.

ⁱⁱ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*; (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995) 301.

ⁱⁱⁱ I understand well that elders and pastors are the same persons in the New Testament and that local churches need elders, and not just a “pastor.” But as Paul told Timothy, those who labor in word and doctrine are to be given special honor.

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