

The Fad-Driven Church

by Todd Wilken

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LAKE FOREST - Rick Warren, author of the best selling, "The Purpose-Driven Life," has written his last book. Warren announced Saturday that he is leaving publishing. "I'm just feeling led in a new direction now. My books will still be out there, it's just that I won't be writing any more new ones." Warren is pastor of Saddleback Church in Lake Forest.

The mood is somber as several dozen clergy gather outside Warren's Saddleback church. Many wear Hawaiian shirts, a look Warren made popular among pastors a decade ago. Some take turns reading aloud from their Purpose-Driven Life Journals.

Warren's withdrawal from publishing follows a similar move this year by Bill Hybels, pastor of Willow Creek Community church near Chicago.

Warren has dominated Christian publishing for a decade. "The Purpose-Driven Life" has sold 24 million copies since 2002. Warren's other books include "Practical Purpose: How to Do Life Purposefully," and "A Purpose-Driven Retirement." Hybels' books, "Becoming a Contagious Christian," "Beyond Contagious: Six Signs of an Infectious Christian," and "The Epidemic Christian" were also best sellers. In March Hybels also announced the end of his Willow Creek Leadership Summits.

Mark Jones has been pastor at Metropolitan Family Fellowship in Ventura since 2004. "I feel a little betrayed. I mean, I've pretty much based my entire ministry on Warren and Hybels' stuff. I don't know what I'm going to do now. And I can't imagine what I'm going to tell my congregation."

Jones is looking for something to fill the expected void in his ministry. "It's not like my congregation is going to put up with just interpreting Scripture every Sunday. That'll hold their interest for about two seconds."

A representative of Zondervan, Warren and Hybels' publisher, responded to Saturday's announcement, "Rick's decision is obviously going to impact our bottom line. If worse comes to worst, we can always go back to selling Bibles."

The dictionary defines a fad as "a practice or interest followed for a time with exaggerated zeal." This could just as well be a description of congregational life of many Christian churches today.

There is a new book, a new program or a new emphasis every year or so. It's all anyone can talk about; it's all the preacher preaches about—for a while. Then, as quickly as it came, it's gone. As eagerly as it was received, it's abandoned and forgotten.

Welcome to the Fad-Driven church.

At first this might not sound like a problem. Some Christians can remember when the Church didn't jump from bandwagon to bandwagon every year or two. But for others, this is all they have ever known. For them, it is hard to imagine what the Church would be like without the constant ebb and flow of church fads. For them, the long list of church fads represents their personal history as a Christian: Spiritual Gift inventories, Spiritual Warfare, Promise Keepers, Weigh Down Workshop, *The Prayer of Jabez*, the *Left Behind* series, *Becoming a Contagious Christian*, a long succession of evangelism and stewardship programs, and most recently, *The Purpose-Driven Life* and *40 Days of Purpose*. There are many Christians for whom this list (give or take one or two) is Christianity.

Some church fads come and go, some come and stay. A few are genuinely harmless; most contain serious theological errors. All are popular —while they last. In the fad-driven church, "exaggerated zeal" has replaced "the faith once for all delivered to the saints." ¹

In the course of hosting Issues, Etc. I've examined most, if not all of the recent church fads. I am always surprised —not by the fads themselves, but by something else. I am always surprised by how uncritically churches accept a fad, how enthusiastically churches embrace a fad and how carelessly churches abandon a fad. That is why this article isn't about the fads themselves, but about the kind of churches that accept, embrace and then abandon fads.

The Life Cycle of a Church Fad

Every fad has a life cycle. The fad is first accepted, then embraced and finally abandoned. For the fad-driven church, this life cycle is a way of life.

The cycle begins with acceptance. The fad-driven church is practiced at this. Too close an examination of the fad at the outset might raise too many questions. "After all, this book is a best-seller!" "Thousands of churches are doing it, how can we go wrong?" Accept first, examine later, if at all. This acceptance may come through the pastor's active promotion or through grassroots popularity. Either way, the fad spreads like wildfire in the congregation.

The cycle continues with enthusiastic embrace. By "enthusiastic" I don't mean excitement or emotion, although those things may be involved. What I mean is that the

fad-driven church embraces its latest fad with creedal intensity. While the fad has currency, it is an article of faith. Belief in the fad becomes a mark of loyalty to the church. During this phase of the fad's life cycle, critics of the fad may be dismissed as unloving, judgmental or unconcerned for saving souls. At the very least, they are viewed as troublemakers and obstacles to the church's mission. During this phase, in some cases, the fad may dictate what is preached, the content of Bible study or even the focus of congregation life.

The life cycle ends with the abandonment of the fad. Some fads have a built-in expiration *date* (*40 Days of Purpose*), most simply linger until something better comes along. The fad-driven church may cling with a martyr's fervor to the fad while it lasts, but everyone knows that its days are numbered. Sooner or later it will have to be abandoned.

Accept the fad, embrace the fad and abandon the fad. This is the life of fad-driven church.

There are exceptions to this life cycle. In a few cases, a fad doesn't die; it grows into something bigger than a fad. It grows into a movement. The Church Growth movement, the Charismatic movement and the Word-Faith movement all started as fads. Now they are something more. Advocates point to their movement's longevity as a sign of its truth. They forget that the Church's history is littered with many fads-turned-movements —Gnosticism, Arianism, Pelagianism to name only a few — we call them heresies.

I have often been critical of church fads at the height of their popularity. After several encounters with fad defenders, I noticed something. The seasoned member of the fad-driven church will defend his fad today. But he will happily abandon the same fad six months from now. I realized that the fad itself is inconsequential; everyone knows that it will be forgotten sooner or later. Christians caught in the cycle of church fads must defend a particular fad, because by doing so, they are defending their willingness to accept, embrace and abandon fads in general. They are defending their fad-driven-ness.

A Lack of Discernment

The need for discernment in the Church is one the most frequent admonitions of Scripture. Paul's warning to the Ephesians is typical:

*We are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves, and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him, who is the head, even Christ.*³

The Church is supposed to stand immovable against “every wind of doctrine.” By contrast, the fad-driven church is a windsock. If you want to know which way the wind is blowing, the latest teachings, the newest programs or the most current methods, just look at the fad-driven church. If you want to know what the fad-driven church will be doing next, just walk through your local Christian bookstore or page through a Christian publisher’s catalogue.

In the fad-driven church, books, programs and seminars are evaluated primarily by their sales, popularity and attendance records, rather than on their theological merits. “False teaching? Why would so many churches be reading this book if it contained false teaching?” “Why would so many attend this event if there anything wrong with it?” Can millions of Christians be wrong? Yes, they can.

Ironically, the fad-driven church often excuses its lack of discernment in the name of saving souls. It justifies its appetite for fads in the name of evangelism. “Whatever it takes” is the creed of the fad-driven church. “Whatever it takes to reach the lost” is supposed to be a courageous new strategy for evangelism. But “Whatever it takes” isn’t a strategy. “Whatever it takes” is an admission that you have no strategy. Sinners aren’t saved by “whatever,” sinners are saved by what Jesus did at the Cross. “Whatever it takes” is just another way of saying, “Whatever people want,” or “Whatever everyone else is doing.” Rather than seeking the lost, the fad-driven church is just seeking its next fix.

Some advocates of church fads take the “Eat the meat, spit out the bones” approach to false teaching. They claim that practicing discernment means spitting the “bones” of error while eating the “meat” of truth. There are several problems with this approach. First, this assumes that a church fad contains only isolated false teachings, like so many bones in a fish. But many church fads don’t just *contain* false teaching; they are *based on* false teaching. Promise Keepers is based on the idea that sinners can keep promises and ultimately keep God’s law. Weigh Down Workshop is based on the idea that man is saved by his works. *The Prayer of Jabez* is based on the idea that God answers prayer because of the character of the one who prays. The *Left Behind* series is based on the idea that national Israel is the key to Bible prophesy. *Becoming a Contagious Christian* is based on

the idea that conversion is an act of the human will. *The Purpose-Driven Life* is based on the idea that you can earn God's favor and heavenly rewards by your works. These fads don't just *contain* false teaching; they are *based on* false teaching.

Second, the "bone-spitting" approach assumes that the errors of the latest church fad will be obvious to everyone. Often they are not. In the 2nd century, Irenaeus battled the fad of Gnosticism. He observed:

Error, indeed, is never set forth in its naked deformity, lest, being thus exposed, it should at once be detected. But it is craftily decked out in an attractive dress, so as, by its outward form, to make it appear to the inexperienced (ridiculous as the expression may seem) more true than the truth itself. ⁴

The "inexperienced" are still infants in the faith. Would you give an infant a fish to eat knowing that there were bones in it?

Finally, the "bone-spitting" approach fails to recognize that a continuous stream of fads will erode the church's ability to discern truth from error. With every new fad, the fad-driven church grows less sensitive to error. With every new fad, the fad-driven church grows less able to recognize the truth. In time, the fad-driven church is unable to discern the true Gospel from a false gospel. Paul found this to be the case among the Corinthians:

If one comes and preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached, or you receive a different spirit which you have not received, or a different gospel which you have not accepted, you bear this beautifully. ⁵

This is the bottom line. A church willing to tolerate *some* false teaching will eventually tolerate *any* false teaching—even a false gospel, a false spirit and a false Jesus. For this reason, when it comes to false teaching, Scripture's command isn't to "bone-spit," but to avoid it altogether. ⁶

Desperation

The Church's fascination with fads is nothing new. The prophet Jeremiah described a similar situation among God's people in his day:

My people have changed their glory for that which does not profit. Be appalled, O heavens, at this, and shudder, be very desolate," declares the LORD. For My people have committed two evils: They have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, to hew for themselves cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water. ⁷

The people had committed apostasy: *they have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters.* And apostasy led to idolatry: *to hew for themselves cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water.*

First, and most importantly, Jeremiah tells what apostasy is. Apostasy is replacing God's fountain of living water with man-made cisterns. It is replacing the message of God's Grace with a message of human works. In the case of many church fads, it is shifting the focus from Christ to the Christian.

Paul encountered apostasy in Galatia. The Galatians had an "exaggerated zeal" for circumcision. Rather than dismiss this as a harmless fad, Paul warned them in no uncertain terms:

I testify again to every man who receives circumcision, that he is under obligation to keep the whole Law. You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace.⁸

This is what many church fads do. There is the subtle legalism of Promise Keepers or the overt legalism of Weigh Down Workshop. There is the Christ-less prayer of Jabez or the Christ-less prophecy in the *Left Behind* series. There is the man-centered view of Justification in *Becoming a Contagious Christian* or the man-centered view of Sanctification in *The Purpose-Driven Life*. In every case, God's Grace in Jesus Christ takes second place to human works, and the focus shifts from Christ to the Christian.

Whenever or however the Church downplays the certainty of Jesus' perfect life, death and resurrection in favor of the uncertainty of human works, it commits apostasy.

This is why the fad-driven church is so desperate. In Jeremiah's words, when you forsake the living waters, you will drink anything to quench your thirst. When the Church forsakes the truth of Gospel, it will try anything, it will buy anything.

This also explains the response I often get from my fellow pastors when I criticize the latest church fad: "Well, sure it contains false teaching, but what's your alternative?" Notice: these are the words of someone who doesn't believe there is an alternative. These are the words of someone who is desperate. These are the words of someone who thinks that he has no choice but to drink polluted water from a broken cistern.

Idolatry is the inevitable consequence of apostasy. Os Guinness' has written recently about the "idol of relevance" and accurately described the mentality of the fad-driven church:

Whatever is is not only right but a great deal better than what was. And of course, whatever is next must be a great deal better still.... The past is beside the point, outdated, reactionary, stagnant. In a word that is today's supreme term of

*dismissal, the past is irrelevant. Everything Christian from worship to evangelism must be fresh, new, up-to-date, attuned, appealing, seeker-sensitive, audience-friendly, and relentlessly relevant, relevant, relevant. "All-new," "must-read," "the sequel that is more than equal" —the mentality is rampant and the effect is corrosive.*⁹

Rather than making the church more relevant, this mentality only makes the fad-driven church more susceptible to fads and more desperate,

Relevance without truth encourages what Nietzsche called the "herd" mentality and Kierkegaard "the age of the crowd." Further compounded by accelerated change, which itself is compounded by the fashion-driven dictates of consumerism, relevance becomes overheated and vaporizes into trendiness.

Guinness' final observation is an uncanny paraphrase of Jeremiah's lament:

*Feverishness is the condition of an institution that has ceased to be faithful to its origins. It is then caught up in "a restless, cosmopolitan hunting after new and ever newer things."*¹⁰

They have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, to hew for themselves cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water. This explains the short life span of so many Church fads. It is the result of desperation. The fad-driven church's new cisterns are broken. They can't hold water. Even while the last drops drain from the old cistern, the fad-driven church must desperately dig a new one. But the new cistern is as leaky as the old one, so the digging must go on.

Nothing to Offer, Nothing to Say

William Inge said, "Whoever marries the spirit of this age will find himself a widower in the next."¹¹ Take away the fads, and what of the Church is left in the fad-driven church?

In some cases, what's left isn't the Church at all, but a collection of principles, practices and ideas that don't add up to anything resembling the Christian faith. Rather than "the pattern of sound words,"¹² there are only the remnants of past fads.

In the name of saving the lost, the fad-driven church is trading the saving message of the Gospel for the newest gimmick. If such a church does reach the lost, will it have anything to say that can save them?

What does the fad-driven church have to offer to its own members? Sure, the next sermon series is new, but is it true? Sure, the next book can sell, but can it save? Will the fad-driven church give Christians Jesus or Jabez, lasting forgiveness or the latest fashion?

And for the member of the fad-driven church who has known nothing but fads, will these fads leave her a Christian on her deathbed (or will she be left wondering what that whirlwind of best sellers, seminars, video sermons and three-ring binders was all about)?

“The church that wraps its identity and mission around the evanescent desires of finicky consumers will run the risk of creating a church as ephemeral as those desires.”¹³ Will the fad-driven church remain the Church? In its “exaggerated zeal” for all things new, will it hold fast to the unchanging message of the Cross?

Fad or Faith

We live in an age of pious distractions. We live in an age of church fads. The fad-driven church has structured its life around the trends and innovations of the day. Christian publishers and the mega-church gurus are ready to provide something new as often as masses demand it. But St. Paul encourages and warns the Church:

*In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.*¹⁴

The Church has something better than any fad. The time has come. Ears are itching. Ears are turning. The Church must take up Paul's charge. Now more than ever the Church must preach the Word and ignore the fads.

Many in the fad-driven church believe that preaching the Word is impractical: “If just preaching the Word worked, people would be lining up at our door.” Others in the fad-driven church believe that preaching the Word is outdated: “It may have worked 50 years ago, but not today.” Others believe that preaching the word is just too simple, Rick Warren has said as much,

*We've all heard speakers claim, "If you'll just pray more, preach the word, and be dedicated, then your church will grow." Well, that's just not true. I can show you thousands of churches where pastors are doctrinally sound; they love the Lord; they're committed and spirit-filled and yet their churches are dying on the vine.*¹⁵

This is nonsense. How can a church that is preaching the living Word of God be “dying on the vine?” Paul tells the Church to preach the Word not because it is the most practical

way, or the most current way, or the simplest way. Paul tells us to preach the Word because it is the *only* way.

For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. For indeed Jews ask for signs, and Greeks search for wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block, and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.¹⁶

G. K. Chesterton said, "The Church always seems to be behind the times, when it is really beyond the times; it is waiting till the last fad shall have seen its last summer. It keeps the key of a permanent virtue." That key is the Gospel, the message of the forgiveness of sins purchased at the Cross, with the blood of Jesus.

That key is the Gospel proclaimed to every sinner every Sunday. That key is the Gospel poured out on every sinner in Baptism. That key is the Gospel provided to every sinner in Jesus' body and blood in His supper. Yes, this Gospel is popularly believed to be impractical, outdated, and simplistic. But it isn't. Rather, this Gospel is "the power of God unto salvation for everyone who believes."¹⁷

Without this Gospel, the Church is at the mercy of every new fad. However, with this Gospel, the Church really is beyond the times.

As I write this, my 12-year-old daughter is convinced that hip-hugger bell-bottoms are the greatest idea in fashion history. I don't have the heart to tell her that I used to think so too. She thinks her father looks old-fashioned and lacks all sense of style. I don't have the heart to tell her that I look back at pictures of my bell-bottom days and laugh. I don't have the heart to tell her that someday she will do the same. The Church is an old man who has been wearing the same clothes in the same style his whole life. He refuses to change with the fashions. He simply lets the fads pass him by. Yes, he seems behind the times. But look again at what he is wearing. He is clothed in Christ.

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¹ Jude 3.

² Romans 16:17; 1 Corinthians 14:29; 2 Corinthians 13:5; Galatians 1:9; Philippians 1:8-11; 1 Thessalonians 5:21; 2 Thessalonians 3:6; 1 Timothy 4:6,16; 6:3-5; 2 Timothy 1:13; 2:15; 4:3-5; Titus 1:7-14; 2:1; 1 John 4:1; Hebrews 5:14.

³ Ephesians 4:14-15.

⁴ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Adversus Haereses*, I, 2, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, ed., Hendrickson, 1994.

⁵ 2 Corinthians 11:4.

⁶ Galatians 2:4-5; 5:9; 1 Corinthians 5:6; Philippians 3:2; 2 Thessalonians 2:15; 1 Timothy 4:6-7; 6:20-21; 2 Timothy 1:13-14; 2:16-18; 3:1-17; 2 Peter 2:1-3; 3:17-18; Revelation 2:14-16.

⁷ Jeremiah 2:11-13.

⁸ Galatians 5:3-4.

⁹ Os Guinness, *Prophetic Untimeliness, A Challenge to the Idol of Relevance*, Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003, pp. 40, 76.

¹⁰ Os Guinness, *Dining with the Devil, The Megachurch Movement Flirts with Modernity*, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993, p. 63.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² 2 Timothy 1:13.

¹³ Philip Kenneson, James Street, *Selling Out the Church, The Dangers of Church Marketing*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997, p. 20.

¹⁴ 2 Timothy 4:1-4

¹⁵ Rick Warren, "Rick Warren Interview" at <http://www.pastors.com/portal/news/August/RickInterview.asp>

¹⁶ 1 Corinthians 1:21-25. Also Matthew 24:14; Luke 24:46-47; Romans 10:17; 16:25-27; 2 Corinthians 4:5; Colossians 1:25-28.

¹⁷ Romans 1:16.