ABSTRACT

A NEW PURPOSE:
RICK WARREN, THE MEGACHURCH MOVEMENT, AND EARLY TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY AMERICAN EVANGELICAL DISCOURSE

by

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This thesis is a study of Rick Warren, celebrity pastor and bestselling author of The Purpose Driven Life, and his role in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century American evangelical discourse. This thesis provides a historical, cultural, and theological description of American evangelicalism and of the megachurch movement in order to facilitate an understanding of Warren’s influence on both categories. Finally, this thesis argues that Warren’s influence and leadership are causing a cultural and theological shift within American evangelicalism.
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RICK WARREN, THE MEGACHURCH MOVEMENT, AND EARLY TWENTY-FIRST
CENTURY AMERICAN EVANGELICAL DISCOURSE

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Introduction

This is a study of Rick Warren and his role in the twenty-first century American evangelical discourse. Insofar as Warren is the founder and senior pastor of Saddleback Church, one of the largest megachurches in the United States, the following is also a study of the megachurch movement. More accurately, however, this thesis offers the reader a snapshot of a religious community, and a leader, in transition.

I recognize that the moment this study is complete, it will be dated—this is the consequence of focusing on a living, breathing person. The following thesis is an attempt to situate Rick Warren within American evangelicalism and within the megachurch movement; however as such, it attempts the impossible. American evangelicalism is a constantly changing discourse, as is the megachurch movement. Warren also is a dynamic, and multi-faceted person. This thesis is an attempt to freeze and examine a moment in time when all three of these forces were acting on each other. It attempts to contextualize Warren’s ministry and predict his trajectory.

The first chapter outlines the parameters of American evangelicalism. Inspired by Dr. Mary Kupiec Cayton’s counsel, I have chosen the term *nebula* to describe twenty-first century evangelicalism in the United States. Evangelicalism in the United States is not a static ahistorical set of doctrines and dogmas, but a complex web of histories, ideas, debates, people, and beliefs. Insofar as it is a cloudy, imprecise, yet cohesive, and constantly moving religious tradition, *nebula* is a useful descriptor. The second chapter outlines the megachurch movement and offers a definition of *megachurch* that captures more than size. The final chapter is dedicated to Warren’s ministry, his books, initiatives, and his church. In short, the final chapter is dedicated to examining Warren’s unofficial leadership role in the evangelical nebula, and where he intends to lead.

The early twenty-first century is proving to be an interesting and difficult time for American evangelicalism. Interest in the domestic and social issues of the religious right has begun to wane. Younger generations are interested in a more socially relevant and positively-articulated platform that addresses global as well as domestic concerns. Evangelicals are now attempting to craft religious responses to new challenges such as terrorism, climate change, and economic uncertainty. This transition may provide a wider net for the evangelical community, but it may also create divisions within the community. The following is an examination of Rick
Warren’s leadership of the American evangelical community in this precarious and exciting time.
Chapter 1: American Evangelical Discourse in the Early Twenty-First Century

The United States of America is a nation of big. From the Grand Canyon to the Empire State Building, Americans have never failed to marvel at size. Enamored with quantity, expansion, and growth, we have pushed out and built high. We are the nation that transformed the military HUM-V into a civilian status symbol. Americans have exempted little from their love of big. Homes, cars, hamburgers, and even churches have been “super-sized.” The evangelical megachurch has garnered significant attention over the last several decades. Springing up first across the Sunbelt, and quickly spreading even to regions as unlikely as New England, megachurches have created a new paradigm of religious expression within the American evangelical discourse, challenging established categories and posing significant questions for both scholars and practitioners of American religion.

Covering suburban landscapes with sprawling campuses and even farther sprawling parking lots, megachurches offer a high-gloss, upbeat, target-specific brand of evangelicalism that is ready and able to compete for the time and energy of the stressed-out, over-scheduled, fast-paced American family. As Randall Balmer acknowledges, megachurches have become a cliché—quite a feat for a movement scarcely older than a quarter century.¹ Yet megachurches are not simply the big-box stores of the American religious marketplace. Megachurches are formulaic, but they are not all the same. Contrary to popular portrayal, megachurches did not spring up out of nowhere and they are not static. The megachurch movement has its own history rooted in the America evangelical tradition.

Since they emerged, megachurches have presented new challenges and opportunities for the multifaceted American evangelical discourse. When churches like Chuck Smith’s Cavalry Chapel or Bill Hybels’ Willow Creek Community Church first began attracting thousands, some evangelicals looked askance at their use of secular-sounding music, their casual tone, or their prominent use of technology and business jargon. Criticism waned as these churches proved themselves to be effective new packaging for an evangelical message. Consequently, megachurches settled comfortably into their place in the complicated web of American evangelicalism. But no movement is static. Just as scholars and journalists seem to be getting a

¹ Randall Balmer, Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory 4th Ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 323.
handle on these places, just as we are creating language with which to talk about them, the paradigm is shifting.

At the center of the shift is megachurch pastor, best-selling author, and evangelical mogul, Rick Warren. Warren’s meteoric rise, like Warren himself, has been unexpected and unpredictable. He began as a typical megachurch church-planter (although his initial ambitions were grand, even for the megachurch movement), founding Saddleback Church in the affluent Southern Orange county suburb of Lake Forest, California. When his church growth initiatives began bringing hundreds to Saddleback, he wrote *The Purpose Driven Church: Growth Without Compromising Your Message & Mission*, documenting Saddleback’s successful strategies so that other pastors could learn from his model. But it was not until *The Purpose Driven Life: What On Earth Am I Here For?* hit shelves in 2002 that Warren became a household name.

*The Purpose Driven Life: What on Earth Am I Here For?* is one of the best-selling nonfiction titles in American publishing history. It has been translated into 56 languages and into an assortment of merchandising forms such as *The Purpose Driven Life Journal*, *The Purpose Driven Life calendar*, the pocket-sized version of the book, and *The Purpose-Driven Life Scripture Keeper Plus*. Eager to capitalize on the success of the original book, publisher Zondervan also teamed with Warren to publish *Daily Inspiration from the Purpose Driven Life: Mediations on The Purpose Driven Life*; and the *Living with Purpose* series of inspirational books that includes *God’s Answers to Your Questions*. Outside of publishing are the *Purpose* workshops and programs offered by religious and secular organizations. An estimated fifty thousand churches across the globe have completed the “40 Days of Purpose” program based on the book’s forty-day structure. Wal-Mart, Coca-Cola, Fold Motor Company, and the United States Air Force as well as several professional sport franchises, all offer workshops and other programs based on the *The Purpose Driven Life*.

It is easy to see why *Christianity Today* as well as *Time Magazine* have both named Warren among the twenty five most influential evangelicals in the nation. Warren delivered the invocation at the 2004 Presidential Inaugural Gala and the benediction at the inauguration of

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2 This estimate comes from Saddleback Church, and has been corroborated by a number of news outlets. See: http://www.rickwarren.com/


President Obama in January of 2009. Both political parties have vigorously sought his counsel and endorsement. In August of 2008, Warren invited both presumptive presidential nominees to his church for a public discussion called “The Faith Forum.” Both campaigns quickly rearranged the candidates’ schedules to allow them to attend. Warren has been called “America’s Pastor” and “the next Billy Graham,” and neither title is undeserved—although, as will become clear, Warren and Graham have significant differences.

Like Graham before him, Warren is the unofficial leader of evangelicalism in the United States—a demographic that does not take well to unified leadership. He has his critics, of course, mainly from conservative Christian blogs and talk radio, and he is certainly not the only celebrity pastor of his time: there are other stars in the evangelical nebula, each with their own gravitational pull on the discourse. But given the scope and depth of his influence, from his books, to his church, to his ambiguous but considerable political role, his global charity and church organization initiatives, and his seemingly endless network of people and projects, Warren exercises significant influence on the direction of both the megachurch movement and evangelicalism in the United States more broadly. Warren is not simply rising to the top of a static movement: he is shaping debates, changing foci, and offering new language with which American evangelicals might articulate their religious identities. He is redefining what it is to be an evangelical in twenty-first century America. The aim of the following is to explain how, why and to what end.

Before continuing with this examination of Warren’s influence on American evangelicalism and on the megachurch movement, it may be helpful to define those two categories more carefully. What exactly is evangelicalism, and what is an evangelical megachurch? We cannot go any further without clear definitions of both. Unfortunately, both are slippery categories. The term evangelical has connotated different groups, agendas, theological tenets, and priorities over various cultural climates, historical periods, and geographic regions. There is simply no trans-historical, trans-regional, trans-cultural definition of evangelical—nor would one be helpful, even if it were to exist. The following will attempt to define the

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evangelical discourse in which Warren operates, as it exists in the early twenty-first century in
the United States.

Even with these temporal and geographic limitations, the task is daunting, which is the
wonder of Graham’s and Warren’s accomplishments. These men have managed to become
spokesmen for a complex culture that evades definition and disdains hierarchy. The American
evangelical culture is a continually evolving, complex and intricate nebula of people, histories,
ideas and theologies. It has porous and difficult-to-define boundaries. Further, there are internal
disagreements regarding inclusion. Yet despite these realities, an evangelical culture in the
United States exists – a diverse one, but a culture nonetheless – and cultures have collective
histories, commonalities, and a shared discursive framework. Uncovering this shared language
can reveal the parameters, permeable as they may be, of the early twenty-first century American
evangelical nebula.

The language of American evangelicalism is distinctive and can be surprisingly uniform
on certain topics. In church-published statements of faith, sermons, and even casual
conversation, there is a shared language, and the continuity of vocabulary is strong on
theological tenets, particularly those concerning sin, salvation, and scripture. There is a
theological grammar that is used throughout the category despite variations in lexicon. 6
However, discourses of doctrine are interwoven with those concerning cultural, social and
political matters, and present language is shaped by the challenges of the past as much as by
those of the present and future. It is difficult to separate theological and cultural discourses, or
past and present issues: each inspires, challenges, and reinforces the other. American evangelical

6 I am borrowing this model of language from Steven Prothero, who uses the terms grammar and
lexicon to describe the structure of religion. This model is useful in unpacking evangelicalism in
the United States, particularly in light on this study’s focus on language. As in language, the
grammar refers to the deep structure of a religion or culture, while the lexicon is the more
apparent component. The idea is similar to Clifford Geertz’s example of the wink. One might
mimic the physical process of winking by closing one eye rapidly—but this is not winking. There
is a grammar to winking, an irony, an intention. One must understand the concept of winking in
order to wink. If you don’t you’re just twitching. So it is with American evangelicalism—
cultural adaptability is written into the grammar as deeply as some theological tenants and
exhibits most evidently in its lexicon or vocabulary.

Steven Prothero, The White Buddhist: The Asian Odyssey of Henry Steel Olcott (Bloomington,
IN: Indiana University Press, 1996) 4.; Clifford Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures, (New
discourse in the early twenty-first century is a complex web of theological, political, and cultural language, old and new. The following pages will trace the development of the relevant portions of this web of discourse and attempt to situate Rick Warren within it. The aim here is to shed some light on how the discourse shaped his rise and how he came to be a dominant voice in it.

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If one focuses on theological language, much of the early twenty-first century American evangelical discourse centers on three foundational concepts: sin—its nature, its origin, and how one commits and avoids it; salvation—to whom salvation applies, how it is granted, and the consequences thereof; and scripture—its nature, its authority, and its function.

If we begin with the concept of sin, we will note a remarkably consistent discourse regarding the “born-again” experience. As Randall Balmer notes, this experience is central to the evangelical cultural identity. The term is drawn from Jesus’ encounter with Nicodemus in John 3:1 “Jesus answered them ‘Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom a heaven without being born again from above.’” Moreover, the term is often used both as a verb and as an identifying term, a fact that obviously underscores its centrality—one is born again, and one is a born-again Christian. In the evangelical discourse, the term “born-again Christian” is often juxtaposed with “liberal” or “uncommitted” Christian. The term “born-again” is ubiquitous. It is readily used across socio-economic, racial, and regional boundaries. Indeed, American evangelicals of every race and region will often identify as born-again Christians even before they identify as evangelicals.

One is “born again” or “saved” when one repents and accepts salvation through God’s grace, which is given through Christ’s blood atonement. Evangelical soteriology is based largely on the Lutheran contrast between “grace” and “works.” Within this discourse, salvation is described as a “free gift”; it cannot be earned by good works. As noted on one evangelical church’s statement of faith, “nothing you can do can earn God’s grace.”

The born-again experience is indicative of American evangelicalism’s focus on the individual. The language surrounding the born-again experience is often keenly emotional and

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7 Balmer, Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory, vi.
8 Oxford Annotated Bible. All biblical references to follow are also taken from the Oxford Annotated Bible.
discussed in personal, relational, and even therapeutic terms. It often involves phrases like “accepting Christ as your *personal* savior,” “developing a *relationship* with Jesus” or “inviting Christ into your *heart*.“ This language places the focus on the individual, and the emotional weight of a personally transformative experience. It indicates an individual, rather than a social or communal, view of salvation.

The focus on the individual and the emotional certainly predates the early twenty-first century evangelical culture of Rick Warren. The ministries of Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield during the First Great Awakening, as well as those of Methodist leader John Wesley, convey a deep sense of individually-focused, emotional religious experience. The revivalists of the Second Great Awakening took this further. Charles G. Finney and Lyman Beecher orchestrated their revivals to capitalize on the emotions, and to underscore their messages of personal salvation. Finney, in particular, was known for his use of the “Anxious Bench.” The tactic involved calling a particularly vulnerable-looking person to the stage and preaching directly to him, until the anxious individual realized his need for a conversion experience and repented. 10

This emphasis on the individual was driven further into the evangelical discourse by premillennial dispensationalism. First articulated by Irish theologian John Nelson Darby in the mid-nineteenth century, premillennial dispensationalism galvanized and reassured American evangelicals who were disillusioned by the turmoil of the nineteenth century. The Civil War and the failures of reconstruction, growing urbanization and its resulting poverty, among other challenges, cast a long shadow of doubt on optimistic projections of human history. Dispensationalists claimed that the decline of society was part of the prophesied end-times, and that only the saved would be *raptured up* and spared from the world’s ultimate descent into sin and chaos known as the *tribulation*.

Premillennial dispensationalism underscored the notion of individual, rather than group or social, salvation. Dispensational eschatology inspired many evangelicals to move away from social reform initiatives and toward missions aimed at individuals. As Dwight L. Moody put it, “I look upon this world as a wrecked vessel…God has given me a life boat and said, ’Moody, 10

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Premillennial dispensationalism, although relatively new to the discourse, is prevalent, inspiring popular and profitable entertainment like the 1972 film *A Thief In The Night*, as well as the more recent *Left Behind* book series and subsequent films.

A shared grammar and lexicon is also used among evangelicals when discussing scripture. The importance of Bible study is consistent across the evangelical discourse. There is also a consensus on how the Bible should be read, interpreted, and used. Language such as “inerrant,” “literally true,” “sufficient,” and “the word of God” is ubiquitous. Further, scripture is not only an accurate picture of history, but also the ultimate authority on issues of the present day, as well as a predictor of what is to come.

There is discrepancy among evangelicals regarding scripture translations; however, most are comfortable with most translations, and many have more recently become enamored with innovative versions aimed at specific demographics such as women and youth. *How* the Bible is read is more important than which version is read—that is, more of a shared language emerges around which interpretation of scripture is acceptable than around which translations of scripture are acceptable. Some evangelicals are exclusively loyal to the King James Version or the New Revised Standard translation; however, many also favor versions like *The Women’s Study Bible* and even translations of the New Testament like *Revolve*, aimed at teenage girls and formatted to look like a teen fashion magazine.

Evangelicals who hold to a particularly literal interpretation of scripture are often branded with the term *fundamentalist*. In recent years, specifically since the decline of the religious right, many evangelicals have struggled to distance themselves from the label. Their struggles have been largely unsuccessful. Doctrinally, there is not a vast different between fundamentalist and non-fundamentalist evangelicals. The distinction has more to do with emphasis and social issues than with doctrine. Most American evangelicals hold that scripture is inerrant; fundamentalists are quicker to champion a literal interpretation, hold to new-earth creationism, and to argue for conservative social causes by pointing at scripture. Fundamentalism was, in large part, a response to a series of perceived attacks, in the first decades of the twentieth century.

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12 *Revolve* is published by Thomas Nelson, which also publishes *Refuel* for teen males, *Becoming* for 20-somethings, and *Blossom* for “tweens” (ages 11-13). Since its publication in 2003, *Revolve* has sold over a million copies, according to Thomas Nelson’s website in July of 2007.
Evangelicals battled rapid social and scientific modernization and lost—fundamentalism was the resulting scar.

Originally, the term "fundamentalism" was derived from a series of essays entitled The Fundamentals, published in twelve volumes beginning in 1910 by oil industrialists Lyman and Milton Stewart. The books attempted to articulate the fundamentals of evangelical Christianity, but their more urgent intention was to combat what some evangelicals saw as the threat of religious modernism or liberalism. 13

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries brought myriad religious and social challenges to evangelical Christianity. Darwinian evolution changed the scientific understanding of human origins. German higher criticism gained prevalence and American interest in the German school of hermeneutics grew. The influx of immigration brought an unprecedented number of non-Protestant immigrants to the United States, many of whom were exploited by industrialists as cheap labor and terrorized by nativist groups. The progressive reformers attempting to bring order to the chaos of the new urban slums were mostly “modernist” Protestant postmillennialists. The Fundamentals attempted to combat modernist voices emanating from elite universities and divinity schools such as Yale and Harvard and to cast Darwinian scientists and liberal urban reformers as enemies of traditional evangelical Christianity.

The Fundamentals provided the language for the doctrine of scriptural inerrancy, but the event that welded the doctrine to the American evangelical identity was the trial of John T. Scopes. The 1925 trial revolved around the teacher’s use of Darwinian evolution in his science curriculum. Scopes was a minor, if necessary, player in the event. The trial soon became a frenzy and a national spectacle as the focus shifted onto the two legal giants, Clarence Darrow (representing Scopes) and William Jennings Bryan (the prosecutor). During the trial, the press succeeded in painting Bryan (and with him, all fundamentalists) as backward, simple, and antithetical to progress, reason, and science. Legal historian Edward Larson has argued that Bryan took up the cause of fundamentalism first and foremost to fight for the dignity of the poor farmers and the working class. Larson rightly notes that the trial and, more importantly, the media coverage of the trial, wedded a religious ideology to class and regional identity.

13 Balmer, Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory, xi.
Regardless of why Bryan championed the cause, he was painted as a buffoon, and his evangelical constituents were regarded as “brainless, southern religio-maniacs.”

The Scopes trial signaled yet another pessimistic retreat from the public forum. As Balmer notes, evangelicals “retreated to a subculture of their own making.” New social communities, schools, and Bible colleges were founded, and those that had been founded in the previous generation, such as the Moody Bible Institute, grew. Evangelicals retreated from the public arena and from politics into an intellectual and social realm they controlled. “The world,” as it were, was a damned place awaiting judgment. Until that judgment came, American evangelicals would do their best to stay out of it. Evangelical groups remained largely absent from public and political forums for over fifty years, until the rise of the religious right in the early 1980s.

From the late 1970’s through the 1990s, evangelicals returned to politics with remarkable ferocity. Beginning with the election of Southern Baptist and professed “born again” Christian Jimmy Carter, the American evangelical subculture began emerging from the margins. However, President Carter’s support of liberal social issues such as the Equal Rights Amendment and the *Roe v. Wade* United States Supreme Court decision lost him the support of his evangelical base. Disappointed and dismayed by Carter’s positions, evangelical leaders Jerry Falwell, Tim LaHaye, Paul Weyrich, and Robert Grant took matters into their own hands and formed The Moral Majority, a political organization aimed at instilling evangelical values into American law. The Moral Majority vehemently opposed abortion, the ERA, and homosexuality. Under the non-religious banner of “family values,” the Moral Majority and its network of smaller evangelical organizations worked to implement legislation that would limit access to abortion and birth control, undermine homosexual civil rights, end comprehensive sex education in schools, censor “anti-family” media programming, and enforce traditional gender roles.

The Moral Majority tapped into a voting bloc that had been silent for decades and, with grassroots organization, quickly became a formidable force in national politics. After the disappointment of Democrat Jimmy Carter, the newly galvanized conservative evangelical block

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15 Balmer, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*, 42.
found an ally in Republican California governor Ronald Reagan. Despite the fact that Reagan actually did little in office to further the causes of conservative evangelicals, the alliance wed the latter to the Republican Party and made evangelical issues a requisite component of the Republican platform.

In the late 1980s, evangelicals gained even more political weight with the creation of the Christian Coalition. After an unsuccessful bid for the Republican presidential nomination in 1988, Pat Robertson turned his defunct campaign into an evangelical mobilization effort called the Christian Collision. The organization did not hit its political stride, however, until young and savvy Ralph Reed took control of the operation in 1989. The Christian Coalition continued the evangelically-oriented political agenda of the Moral Majority and branched further into seemingly non-religious issues of foreign policy and tax legislation. As many political historians have noted, by the 1990s, the evangelical lobby was one of the most powerful forces in Washington. Scandal would eventually force Reed to resign, however, and Reed’s resignation, as well as other scandals that would follow, shook the foundations of the evangelical political bulwark.

In the first decade of the twenty-first century more and more evangelicals became politically polarized. As of 2008, only forty percent of evangelicals under age thirty identified as Republican; in 2006, the number was fifty-five percent. The hot button issues of the 1990s such as homosexual rights and abortion had cooled.

Although most young American evangelicals remained somewhat socially conservative, in the first decade of the twenty-first century fewer evangelicals associated strongly with either political party. Studies showed that global concerns, took priority over domestic issues such as abortion and school prayer, particularly for evangelicals under the age of thirty-five. New leaders have emerged to usher in a more moderate evangelical agenda, such as Jim Wallis, founder and president of the progressive evangelical publication Sojourners, and Richard Cizik, environmental activist and head of the Office of Government Affairs for the National

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18 The study was conducted by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life. February, 2008. It is available here: [http://religions.pewforum.org/reports/affiliations](http://religions.pewforum.org/reports/affiliations)
Association of Evangelicals. Environmentalism, once an exclusively liberal cause, found new supporters among some American evangelicals. In 2006, the Evangelical Climate Initiative, which lobbies for emission standards, alternative energy development, and conservation initiatives, was founded and endorsed by eighty-six evangelical leaders and theologians.20

The discourse is shifting and it has been for several years. In the late 1990s, many young evangelicals went looking for a new articulation of evangelical, new ways to channel their religious identities—ways to be evangelical without being anti-homosexual, anti-feminist, anti-science, or even Republican. As the Religious Right began to lose its grip, some evangelicals pushed to depoliticize their religious identities. Many evangelicals yearned to articulate their faith in the language of a new century. They did not want to look to a bygone past; they did not want “That Old Time Religion.” Rather, young evangelicals looked to their faith to help negotiate the challenges of an increasingly complex and global twenty-first century. They wanted to participate in, and contribute to, the secular culture, not simply to condemn it or to control it. They needed more than Jerry Falwell’s jeremiads or Ralph Reed’s political agendas. They needed personalization, meaning, and purpose.

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Students of the early twenty-first century American evangelical discourse can not limit the parameters of the discourse to doctrinal issues of sin, salvation, and scripture, nor simply to politics. Indeed, one might argue that the most elemental defining characteristic of American evangelicalism in the early twenty-first century has nothing to do with theology or doctrine. This adaptability is the characteristic that allows evangelicals to ride the ebbs and flows of political trends. It is also the only quality that approximates a trans-historical characteristic. Randall Balmer calls the adaptability the ability to “speak the idiom of the culture.”21

Early twenty-first century American evangelicals are a diverse and dynamic demographic. This diversity and dynamism is both the root and the result of the culture’s ability to reinvent itself when new challenges arise, be they doctrinal, political, or even geographic. From the Methodist circuit riders who traversed the country on horseback, spreading the gospel

21 Balmer, Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory, 5.
in the newly opened West, to the itinerant preachers of the Second Great Awakening, with their boisterous camp meeting revivals on the edge of the frontier; from the urban revivals of Billy Sunday, to the anti-communist Crusades of Billy Graham, to the Pacific Ocean baptisms of counter-culture minister Chuck Smith; from the suburban megachurch, to Rick Warren’s *Purpose Driven* program: the story of evangelicalism in the United States is a testament to religious innovation and cultural adaptability. This adaptability may not be discussed overtly by congregants or written into statements of faith (although it is commonly used when church leaders are writing for other church leaders), but it is an essential component of American evangelicalism’s cultural grammar.

Evangelicals’ cultural adaptability is integrally linked to another ubiquitously American concept—the free market of religion. The first amendment of the United States Constitution makes religious affiliation voluntary and, as such, citizens are free to choose their religious affiliation or abstain completely. As in any unregulated market economy, suppliers must compete for the attention and loyalty of consumers, and consumers will choose the suppliers who best meet their needs. It may seem distasteful to discuss evangelicalism, or any religious identity, as a commodity being actively traded and brokered, bought and sold by pastors, believers, and the secular culture. Yet the language of economics is remarkably applicable to the early twenty-first century evangelical culture in the United States, and as one delves deeper into the megachurch discourse, that vocabulary becomes even more common.

Further, applying an economic model to the study of religion is not without precedent. Rational choice theorists such as Rodger Finke and Rodney Stark suggest that American religious markets function similarly to material markets. According to Finke, free religious markets like that of the United States promote plurality and higher levels of religious activity, as compared to more regulated religious markets like those of France or the United Kingdom. Americans, given a plethora of options, commonly choose their religious affiliations based on a “rational choice”—by weighing costs and benefits. Although rational choice theory is controversial in the sociology of religion generally, it can be very helpful in examining the evangelical megachurch movement.

It is worth noting that economics has not always been as useful a model as it is today, nor is it as useful outside the unique crucible of the United States. The economic method of inquiry cannot be used to interpret all present-day religious activity in the United States, or even all present day evangelical action. The effectiveness of an economic model to describe the evangelical discourse is dependent on a degree of mobility that has not always been as available or popular as it is in the early twenty-first century. The First and Second Great Awakening undermined some denominational loyalties, but they continued to exercise a strong hold on American evangelicals well into the twentieth century. Of course, denominational affiliation was often buttressed by familial, racial, and socioeconomic circumstances as much as by theology.

Today, however, in the United States, many evangelicals are comfortable “trying out” a church, seeing whether they like it, and moving on if they do not.\(^{23}\) Similarly, statistics suggest that many do not seem to have too much trouble leaving a church that no longer meets their needs or configures with their preferences.\(^{24}\) Church choice is shaped by the topics of sermons and the ‘fit’ of a congregation, but also by the mundane realities of meeting times, location, musical styles, and even the availability of parking.

This kind of flexibility is facilitated in part by the ease of physical mobility and its consequences. Increased mobility often erodes communal and familial cohesion, thus rendering individuals free agents on the religious market. As evangelicals began moving to the emerging suburbs in the post-war years, familial and cultural religious ties weakened. Later, in the 1980s, as exurbs and bedroom communities boomed, in large part due to more efficient commuting methods, the American nuclear family became ever more isolated from cultural, ethnic, and familial influences that may have, in previous eras, exercised some influence on religious affiliation.

Increased church “shopping” is facilitated in large part by the notion that the individual, or the nuclear family, is empowered to determine its own religious identity, independent from cultural and ethnic ties. This empowerment is not applicable to all religious groups, or to

\(^{23}\) This kind of mobility, although characteristic of the twentieth century, also occurred earlier in American religious history. The nineteenth century certainly saw a great deal of religious mobility, however it was less common than it became in the late twentieth century and more prevalent on the frontier than it was in urban areas.

mobility across religious traditions. Approaching religious affiliation in this way requires a kind of emotional detachment from church communities and a general apathy towards the doctrinal particularities of denominations. Yet it does not necessarily indicate that American evangelicals are confused or conflicted over their religious beliefs. Alan Wolfe has noted that “what looks like religious switching …[may actually be] people moving around among denominations but not really changing their outlook on the world.” Wolfe argues, and studies corroborate, that denominational shopping may have more to do with elements like music, tone, and the age and income level of the congregation than with doctrine. Further, the very concept of "shopping" suggests a fundamental assumption on the part of the “shopper”—namely, that the church should meet one’s needs or desires, and that one is justified in going elsewhere should it fail to do so. In short, evangelicals in the United States today increasingly approach church membership choices as consumer choices.

This kind of denominational mobility is more characteristic of white evangelicals than of African American, Latino, or other cultural or ethnic groups, in part because white Americans were the first to inhabit the suburbs and exurb communities that fostered the described isolation. African American and Asian American evangelicals in particular remain subject to a larger degree on cultural and familial influence on denominational and church choice. Although the majority of Latino Americans remain Catholic, Latino Americans are shifting demographics dramatically by moving away from Roman Catholic parishes toward evangelical and largely charismatic and pentecostal churches, (this demographic shift is happening elsewhere in the Spanish speaking world as well). For more see, Nancy Tatam Ammerman, Pillars of Faith: American Congregations and Their Partners. (Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 2005) 237; Kimon Howard Sargeant, Seeker Churches: Promoting Traditional Religion in a Nontraditional Way. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000) 159; The Pew Hispanic Center, The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life US Religious Landscape, “Changing Faiths: Latinos and the Transformation of American Religion”, April 25, 2007.  

28 For more on denominational studies see, the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life US Religious Landscape Survey, 2008.
Denominational loyalty among evangelicals in the United States is on the decline, and has been declining for over twenty years.\(^{29}\) The lack of denominational loyalty has begun to evolve into a trend toward non-denominational, or more accurately, post-denominational congregations. Sociologists and religious scholars have argued that American evangelicalism in the twenty-first century is becoming increasingly post-denominational; that religious consumers see denominational affiliation as superficial, unimportant and divisive.\(^{30}\) The trend toward post-denominational church models is not simply a move away from denominations, which congregants increasingly view as unnecessary vestiges of the past; rather, it is a move toward a church model that many churchgoers see as inclusive, authentic, modern, and even closer to the first-century model.

The statistical evidence is compelling, yet one need not do more than note the names of the newest churches in one’s own neighborhood for superficial corroboration. Many more pastors are choosing to deemphasize the denominational affiliation of their churches in order to accommodate this trend. More evangelical churches, particularly those aimed at the age eighteen to twenty-five demographic, are taking up vague, non-denominational names like “Oxford Bible Fellowship,” or even names reminiscent of social clubs and bars like “The Loft.” Rick Warren’s Saddleback Church, for example, is a member of the Southern Baptist Convention, yet there is no mention of this affiliation anywhere on the church’s website, in any of its prominently displayed literature, or on its campus. Why hide an institutional affiliation? Some scholars suggest that the answer to that question may begin in the anti-institutional leanings of the baby-boom generation and with their children and grandchildren, who may be more comfortable with cultural and consumer-driven homogeneity, but are just as likely to romanticize individuality and rebellion.\(^{31}\)

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\(^{30}\) Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism,* 18.

As Wade Clarke Roof has noted in his *A Generation of Seekers*, the baby-boom generation’s hunger for personalized, relevant, and anti-institutional religious outlets led to new heights of religious blending or *cafeteriaism*.\(^{32}\) Catholics took up yoga, Jews learned mantras, and some boomers abandoned established traditions altogether and chose to be “spiritual” rather than “religious.”\(^{33}\) Many evangelical and mainline traditions recoiled at the prevalence of *cafeteriaism* in American religious life and decried the loss of “traditional” modes of religious expression. Others argued that if evangelical churches are to fulfill the Great Commission, they must adapt to attract those wary of organized religious institutions. Perhaps predictably, the congregations and church planters willing to cater to a new set of needs flourished.

Post-denominational church models like Warren’s capitalize somewhat ironically on both an appeal to the future and the past. By eschewing denominational titles, these churches characterize themselves as youthful and in touch with the new priorities of their communities. Post-denominational churches can claim that their approach is a reflection of the times, yet many also claim that post-denominational churches are undistracted by denominational particularities and consequently more focused on important matters of faith. Like all institutions, post-denominational churches have systems of organization and levels of bureaucracy; however, through their non-denominational branding, they are able to appear spontaneous, effortless, egalitarian, and thus more authentic.

A central appeal for post-denominational congregations is the appearance of authenticity, both in individuals and in the religious experience. The prevailing view among many young evangelicals is that denominations are synthetic, and therefore so is the religious experience they provide—remove the superstructure and the authentic experience of evangelical worship will be available. Post-denominational churches package themselves as universal and inclusive, even while towing a socially conservative and often fundamentalist line. Further, this universality is often swathed in references to the early church. Post-denominational churches often claim that their methods are modeled on first century Christian practice, electric guitars and blue jeans notwithstanding. What this “universality” actually refers to is the lack of formal liturgy and the priority placed on informality. By using post-denominational branding, these churches market

\(^{33}\) See Bellah, et.al., *Habits of the Heart*, 246.
themselves as cutting edge while claiming the authority of the past—not the stodgy, distracted, fragmentation of the immediate past, but the unity and purity of *illud tempus.*

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As we can see, evangelicalism in the early twenty-first century United States is a complex web of theological, cultural and political realities. As is evident from statements of belief, sermons, and cultural discourse, evangelicals in the United States today place a high priority on the born-again experience and the inerrancy of scripture. The discourse, however, is made up of more than theology. Evangelicalism in the United States has a legacy of cultural adaptability, which affects denominational demographics, political loyalties, and cultural shifts. Evangelicals have demonstrated a keen ability to weather the storms of new social and political circumstances, to create new ways of expressing their religious identities—to be religious pioneers and innovators. One such innovation is the American Megachurch

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Since the late 1980s, scholars, journalists, and members of various religious communities in the United States (and elsewhere) have been fascinated with (and often baffled by) an evangelical religious innovation called the *megachurch*. During the 1990s, megachurches such as Rick Warren’s Saddleback Church sprung up so quickly, and grew so rapidly, that they seemed poised to eclipse the evangelical category entirely. According to a survey conducted by the Institute for Religion Research in 2007, there were over one thousand megachurches in the United States. Although many cultural critics have likened megachurches to religious Wal-Marts, the comparison is adolescent. Megachurches are neither prefabricated, nor homogenous. There are important characteristics other than size that these churches share. The megachurch movement is as diverse and dynamic as the greater Evangelical culture in which it is situated.

Like the term evangelical, the term megachurch is not easy to define. As the term suggests, a megachurch is a big church, but it is not *simply* a big church. The National Cathedral is a big church; it is not a megachurch. The aim of the following chapter is to flesh out the term, and to provide a brief discussion of the characteristics that bind megachurches into a cohesive category. Further, it will provide a brief history of the movement and look specifically at two of the first and most influential megachurches, Cavalry Chapel and Willow Creek, as case studies for the movement’s development. By so doing, the following discussion will lay the groundwork for an examination of how Rick Warren’s career has affected the megachurch culture and the broader evangelical culture in the United States.

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The term *megachurch* is frustratingly vague, and seems to suggest more of a weight class than a religious and cultural phenomenon. Megachurches are broadly defined as congregations of 2,000 regular attendees or more. Yet megachurches cannot be properly defined by statistics alone.

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36 This 2000-member benchmark does not seem to have been set intentionally by any particular group or scholar, but rather has emerged over the last few decades as an agreed-upon number scholars, journalists and other followers of the movement can use to talk about these
Megachurches are almost exclusively evangelical, often with fundamentalist leanings. Some are denominationally affiliated, but most were the first among American evangelical churches to capitalize on the post-denominational claim of authenticity and universality. The leaders are captivating, but casual and plainspoken, and they are more likely to have MBA’s than degrees in divinity. The congregations are obviously large but usually ethnically and racially homogenous. The majority of megachurch-goers are white, middle-class or affluent suburbanites. There are predominantly African American congregations as well such as New Birth Missionary Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia. These also tend to cater to a middle-class community, although they may draw from, or be located in, more urban rather than suburban areas.³⁷

Megachurches have remained most popular in the Sun Belt of the United States. According to a 2007 study, California, Texas, Florida, and Georgia are the top megachurch-producing states respectively. However, megachurches are a nationwide phenomenon.³⁸ Even Massachusetts, Connecticut and New Jersey are showing megachurch growth.³⁹ Some megachurches occupy former sports stadiums or renovated office buildings, but most are housed in custom-built, multi-facility complexes.

Megachurches have significantly altered the American religious landscape—and not simply because they take up a great deal of real estate. Since their arrival, megachurches have

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³⁷ African American megachurches represent a distinct category within in the movement. For the sake of space (and because they do not have a direct impact on the ministry of Rick Warren) I have chosen not to elaborate on their impact here. However, for more on African American megachurches see Carl S Dudley and David A. Roozen, Faith Communities Today: A Report on Religion in the United States Today. (Hartford, CT: Hartford Institute for Religion Research, Hartford Seminary 2001); Eric Lincoln, and Lawrence H. Mamiya, The Black Church in the African American Experience. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990); Tamelyn Tucker-Worgs. Bringing the Church “Back In”: A Study of Black Megachurches and Their Community Development Activities. Ph.D. Dissertation. (College Park, MD, University of Maryland, 2002)
fundamentally redefined the concept of church. For the millions of Americans who attend megachurches, church is a place with a food court, a great band, a celebrity-like pastor, and a dizzying array of service options catering to every age and taste. Megachurches are willing and able to craft the delivery of their message in order to cater to cultural trends and specific demographics. They strive to respond to every possible desire (and anxiety) of the prospective newcomer or “seeker.” For regular attendees, megachurches facilitate thousands of highly specific small groups, which maintain membership ties and create intimacy in an obviously intimacy-challenged environment. They tailor sermon topics and services to popular culture, demographic shifts, and attention spans. In short, megachurches are in the business of religious marketing.

Despite commonalities such as big parking lots and charismatic pastors, each megachurch caters to its niche. This is perhaps the most essential defining characteristic of the American megachurch: the centrality of culturally responsive niche marketing. At megachurches sermon topics, children’s ministry programs, musical style, and even architectural details are chosen based on whether the target congregants are surfers (Cavalry), or CEOs (Willow Creek), or CEO’s who surf (Saddleback).

Megachurches are designed to attract and maintain target markets, and as such, each church is as unique as its market. What unites them is the priority they place upon attracting those target demographics. Where many religious organizations, particularly in the United States, may have committees and events devoted to outreach, megachurches are built from the ground up to suit the needs and desires of their market. Most megachurches spend a disproportionate amount of marketing energy on the “unchurched” or “seekers” (as opposed to maintaining an existing community). Seekers usually possess a vaguely Christian cultural identity—they celebrate Christian holidays and believe that God exists—but they are unaffiliated with a specific church. Seekers are not invested in other traditions. To put it in economic terms, they do not have a brand loyalty that needs to be converted—they simply need to be properly exposed to a product they never knew but would recognize as something they always needed. As part of their comprehensive marketing strategies, megachurches spend a great deal of energy studying and adapting to potential seekers, anticipating their needs, preparing answers to their questions, and marketing themselves as compatible with their lifestyles.
Again, the economic model serves this examination well. Megachurches decide who their target consumers are and package their product according to what those consumers require. It may seem strange, and perhaps even distasteful, to describe evangelical Christianity as a *product*, or believers as *consumers*; however, this language offers the most accurate characterization of what megachurches do. Further, it is not language megachurch leaders are shy of using themselves.

*The Purpose Driven Church*, Rick Warren’s “how to” book, outlines the methods Warren used to build his successful megachurch. Chapter Nine is entitled “Who is your Target?” In the chapter, the founder of Saddleback Church offers a visual representation of the man he calls “Saddleback Sam,” the personification of his target market in suburban southern Orange County. In detail, Warren describes “Sam’s” likes and dislikes, habits, and hobbies. The sketch includes some basic demographical information (such as income and political affiliation), but also details how “Sam” feels about his life, his relationships, his home, his car, and his career. Warren also sketches “Sam’s” family: “Saddleback Samantha,” Sam’s hypothetical wife and “Saddleback Sally” and “Saddleback Steve,” their hypothetical children. Noticeably, very little in the sketch speaks directly to Sam’s religious views. “Sam” is a lifestyle. Warren explains that understanding “Sam’s” lifestyle makes it easier to market Saddleback as a compatible part of that lifestyle.

Aside from culturally responsive niche marketing, there are several physical characteristics that may help flesh out the term *megachurch*. Megachurch dress codes are almost always casual, but dress norms can depend on the community the church is attempting to reach. For example, although flip-flops and board shorts are perfectly acceptable at Chuck Smith’s Cavalry Chapel in Costa Mesa, California, at Bellevue Baptist in Memphis, Tennessee, many male congregants are more comfortable in sport coats.

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40 According to the publisher Zondervan, the *The Purpose Driven Church* has sold more than thirty million copies since it publication. In 2005, The Barna Group conducted a survey of evangelical pastors asking which books pastors cited as the most “influential” on the ministry (other than the Bible). *The Purpose Driven Church* was ranked #2. *The Purpose Driven Life* was #1. [http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/5-barna-update/178-survey-reveals-the-books-and-authors-that-have-most-influenced-pastor](http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/5-barna-update/178-survey-reveals-the-books-and-authors-that-have-most-influenced-pastor).

The sermons are precisely timed and are often augmented by dramatizations, film clips, and PowerPoint slides. To facilitate intimacy and dispel hierarchy, pulpits are usually absent. Traditional Christian symbolism is also muted. At Joel Osteen’s Lakewood Church in Lakewood, Texas, there is no cross at the center stage. Similarly, at New Life Church (formally headed by Ted Haggard) in Colorado Springs, Colorado, large speakers and colossal video screens flank the stage. Technology is often prominently used. There are no hymnals. There are rarely hymns. The lyrics to the pop-inspired songs often appear on giant screens. Megachurch music is often tailored to the tastes of the target demographic and is often reminiscent of popular secular music. Many megachurch leaders consider music the key to their success and may allot nearly half of the service time to music and congregational singing.

One cannot discuss megachurches without addressing the significance of size. The *mega* in megachurch, is after all, well deserved. Where does this size come from, and how does it function in the identity formation of a megachurch? The logical explanation for megachurch size is as follows: megachurches are savvy marketers; therefore, they are very popular churches, and they have to be big to accommodate their growing congregations. However intuitive this characterization is, it may be backward. It is accurate to say that these churches are multi-functional mega-complexes because their numbers require them to be so, but it also true that they attract such numbers because they are multi-functional mega-complexes.

Although geography, cultural setting and the corresponding marketing makes Bellevue Baptist quite different from Saddleback Church (Bellevue’s chief Pastor Steve Gaines always wears a tie while Rick Warren sports a consistent uniform of Hawaiian shirts), both churches, like most megachurches, are catering to largely suburban or exurban communities. Different as those suburban subcultures may be, they have a few things in common—comfort with and attraction to size is one of them. As far too many real estate developers have discovered, American suburbanites from Los Angeles to Memphis generally tend to value bigger and more. This was particularly true in the 1990s, arguably the zenith of megachurch building and growth. They shop at big-box stores, they enjoy big cars, and live in (or want to live in) big homes. Big became American suburban social code for success, and associating oneself with success is attractive to most people—urban, rural, or suburban.

Aside from big, *familiarity* can also be read as *success* in many American suburban subcultures. This may account for the mall-like or office-like appearances of many
megachurches. Upwardly mobile white suburbanites (most megachurch attendees) generally feel comfortable at work and at multi-functional centers of commerce, especially if there are familiar brands like Starbucks or Gap present. Megachurch planners realize that if they are to entice American suburbanites to spend part of their weekend in church—a place where many feel uncomfortable—they must build a church that feels comfortable and familiar. With this in mind, they build churches that take advantage of the commercial and cultural codes to which their target market is already responding. Megachurch pastors build churches reminiscent of malls and office complexes, not only because they need the space, but also because the target market wants a church reminiscent of a mall and office complex.42

Size is one defining feature of a megachurch, but even more important than size is growth. There is an important distinction between the two terms. Size is static, albeit meaningful; growth indicates and provides momentum. Growth, to put it in terms suggested by Mircea Eliade, is the megachurch movement’s etiological myth.43 This myth is pervasive and strangely consistent within the diverse megachurch culture. It appears at the center of churches as different as cubicle-culture centered Willow Creek in suburban Chicago and surf-bum-focused Hope Chapel of Hermosa Beach, California.44

Typically, the story is as follows: a devoted pastor and a few newly-converted congregants begin meeting in the pastor’s home, or in a storefront, or in a rented space. Soon the congregation swells beyond the capacity of the space. The group moves, swells again, moves, and swells again. Eventually, they build their own space and before they can move in, they have already outgrown it. This continues indefinitely. Even when attendance counts and budgets reflect that a church has ceased to build or grow significantly, growth often remains part of the church discourse. Growth is essential to the stories megachurch communities tell about themselves.

Megachurch communities derive identity and validation from growth, often touting their stories of exponential expansion prominently on church websites, in brochures, and in sermons. Founding pastors often discuss their churches’ growth with a tone of humility and surprise, characterizing the stadium-sized auditoriums as simply necessary for handling the exponential

44 http://www.hopechapel.org/HHistory.htm; http://www.willowcreek.org/history.asp
and unexplainable growth. Growth, then, is characterized as a miraculous demonstration of the power of the evangelical message. This characterization is usually not entirely untrue, but it is not entirely accurate either. The evangelical message, like anything else in a consumer economy, sells better with savvy marking and design behind it.

Careful target marketing makes churches grow, but the growth itself becomes a compelling reason to attend. By being one among thousands, megachurch attendees can count themselves as part of something powerful and popular without having to commit to the risks and responsibilities that membership at a smaller church may require. This is not to suggest that megachurch congregants are not invested in their churches – quite the contrary. Many megachurch congregants make significant contributions of time and money, and when they do, they know that they are participating in something that is already succeeding. By characterizing the church as perpetually on the verge of its next phase of development, megachurch leaders can create the energy and excitement of a fledgling congregation within the safety of an established plant. Similarly, congregants can place themselves within the mythic story of the church’s growth: they can be part of its next big growth spurt, its next expansion.

But size, familiarity, and growth have consequences. Because of their size and the amount of energy that goes into designing “seeker focused” (or newcomer friendly) methods and messages, megachurches can suffer from problems of intimacy and commitment. Many megachurches have solved these problems by fostering what are known as “small groups.” Small groups are usually groups of five to fifteen people who meet in church members’ living rooms or around kitchen tables. The church itself may provide some meeting spaces, but home meetings seem to be more prevalent. Some meet weekly, others monthly or bimonthly. There is usually an official leader, but most decisions are democratically resolved. Many megachurches train and support small group leaders, and some provide curricula in the form of books or DVDs.

45 Miller, Reinventing American Protestantism, 46.
46 Emile Durkheim’s theories on religion and collective effervescence may also be helpful in understanding the megachurch movement—particularly with regard to the role of music. As Durkheim noted, the gathering of a large community can create a transcendent or “effervescent” experience for the individual. Within the megachurch movement, music is often used as community building tool and the congregational singing, dancing, or other participation is often cited by participants as the most meaningful experience in the service. See: Emile Durkheim, Karen Fields, trans., The Elementary Forms of Religious Life (New York: The Free Press, 1995) 162.
A typical meeting can include prayers, readings, discussions, and testimonies. Some groups are ongoing; others have set durations (six weeks or forty days seems to be an average minimum). Many small groups are devoted to systematically working through the Bible systematically; other groups may be devoted solely to specific books of the Bible – the prophetic texts, the gospels, etc. Some may be formed to read and discuss other evangelical literature, like the works of C.S. Lewis, or the popular Left Behind series. Others may function more like group therapy sessions for a specific personal problem or trauma such as divorce, single parenting, bereavement or substance abuse. Small groups enhance the megachurch experience by providing an alternative to that experience—where the main church is big, familiar and anonymous, small groups are intimate, personal and often challenging.

Most megachurches support an intricate and vast network of small groups. Indeed, the small group is such a popular megachurch innovation that a software company called ChurchTeams.com has developed web-based small group search/database software that megachurches can integrate into their websites for a fee. The need for organizational software is keen. Most small group networks are highly specialized: there are groups for working mothers of preschoolers, for single mothers of preschoolers; there are men’s groups, college student’s groups, newlywed’s groups, groups for engaged couples, for seniors, and for teens. The Vineyard Community Church of Cincinnati, a modestly sized megachurch (by megachurch standards) with approximately four thousand weekly attendees has a network of over four hundred small groups. This suggests that a large portion of the community is attending one or more small group at any given time.

The much larger Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, Illinois (there are actually four Willow Creek campuses; South Barrington was the first and remains the largest), has taken the small group idea even further by carving up its sphere of influence using public high school districts. Each district is assigned a “home pastor,” who deals with pastoral

47 ChurchTeams.com would not disclose their sales statistics. However, over the course of my research I was directed toward Church Team software by roughly on third of the megachurch websites I visited. http://www.churchteams.com/
48 The small group network is available via the website at https://www.vineyardcincinnati.com/vcc.php?id=57&s=&st=
care issues and oversees the network of small groups in his or her district.\textsuperscript{49} There are eighty-two districts.

Although not the inventor of the small group concept, Rick Warren has done more than any other megachurch pastor to publicize the idea. Warren’s Saddleback Church, of course, has its own small group network, but Saddleback also sponsors the NEXT Small Group Conference, a nationwide two-day traveling conference which provides church leaders with tools that can help implement successful small group strategies at their own churches. In \textit{The Purpose Driven Church}, Warren devotes an entire chapter to small groups. Underscoring their importance, Warren writes, “The whole church is like a large ship and the small groups are the lifeboats.”\textsuperscript{50}

Robert Wuthnow, in his work on the significance of small groups in religious communities, argues that small groups give a church “a variety of hooks capable of catching the interest of various members.”\textsuperscript{51} Wuthnow goes on to note that the beauty of small groups is that they run largely on their own fuel, draining little from the greater congregation and giving quite a bit of energy back to it. For most megachurches, small groups are low maintenance and high yield. If a group fails to thrive, the greater church organization is insulated enough to barely notice, but if it succeeds, it creates dedicated church members and stands as a testament to the church’s success. Small groups build and maintain a sense of community in the megachurch, even if that community cannot be built be \textit{at} the megachurch. When that sense of community is developed, the larger church is strengthened regardless of the institution’s relative distance from the small group.

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Megachurches are temples to evangelical resourcefulness and adaptability, and although they are marked by an acute focus on adaptability, they were far from the first to apply what we might call religious marketing. From the boisterous revivals of the Second Great Awakening in the early nineteenth century to the modern Christian rock concert, evangelicals have a legacy of religious innovation and entrepreneurialism. One such innovation was the nineteenth-century

\textsuperscript{49} For more on Willow Creek’s district organization see, http://www.willowcreek.org/spiritualformation/communitylife.asp
\textsuperscript{50} Wuthnow. \textit{The Restructuring of American Religion}, 127.
\textsuperscript{51} Wuthnow. \textit{The Restructuring of American Religion}, 125.
“institutional church.” Arguably a forerunner to the megachurch, the institutional church was an urban facility built largely by what we now call the mainline traditions.

Institutional churches were designed to attract the masses of young people abandoning rural communities and small towns for the promise of work and prosperity in the burgeoning urban landscapes. They offered religious services, but also secular activities such as socials, adult education, and childcare. Like the modern megachurch, institutional churches were physically large plants, with expansive worship spaces, but they also included basketball courts, classrooms, and recreation space to accommodate community events. Some of these churches, like Chicago’s Fourth Presbyterian, New York’s Riverside Church, and Boston’s Trinity Episcopal, remain active members of their (albeit changed) communities today. 52

In many ways, the megachurch may seem like the next evolutionary stage of the institutional churches of the nineteenth century. Philosophically, institutional churches were very different phenomena. Where the urban institutional churches sought to improve the community by offering alternatives to the cities’ more illicit entertainments, megachurches rarely have such local goals, in part because they are so often located in disconnected exurban or suburban communities. Megachurch attendees tend to be more concerned with the needs and challenges of their own families than with broader social concerns. As such, most sermons, workshops, and other church activities are likely to address individual or familial issues rather than social improvement.

Other forerunners to the megachurch include Aimee Semple McPherson’s Angelus Temple (founded 1923) and Robert Schuller’s Crystal Cathedral (1955). Not coincidentally, both churches are located in Southern California, which has long been (and continues to be) a hotbed of evangelical innovation. Aimee Semple McPherson, founder of the International Church of the Four-Square Gospel (a denomination rooted in the Holiness tradition), came to prominence during the 1920s. McPherson, like many evangelical leaders, recognized the power of popular culture and media, particularly radio, to spread her message and heighten the profile of her church. It should be also noted that few women of her era commanded her level of authority. Fewer still publicly called for racial integration and gender equality, as Semple McPherson often did.

“Sister Aimee,” as she was known, tapped into the power of nearby Hollywood by augmenting dramatic sermons with popularly-inspired music and elaborate stage productions. Her aim was to entertain as much as to inspire. Semple McPherson’s controversial (and often bizarre) methods rarely failed to capture the attention of the press. In one famous publicity campaign, Semple McPherson advertised an upcoming anti-evolution sermon with posters depicting her wrestling with a giant gorilla. Her elaborate publicity stunts, of which there were many, proved successful; Semple McPherson was one of the most effective organizers and fundraisers of her time. In 1923, when McPherson’s Angelus Temple in Echo Park, Los Angeles was completed, it held over five thousand people.

When Robert Schuller arrived in Los Angeles three decades later, he immediately recognized that it was, and is, a car-centered culture. In deference to the automobile-centered Los Angeles culture, Schuller began delivering sermons from the roof of a refreshment stand at a drive-in movie theater in Garden Grove—gathering worshipers with the slogan “come as you are in the family car.” Schuller’s drive-in would eventually be replaced by far more impressive settings. In the late 1970s, with his congregation quickly outgrowing a one thousand seat, custom-built space, Schuller embarked on a campaign to build a stunning cathedral-like structure made almost entirely of glass. The Crystal Cathedral, designed by signature architect Philip Johnson, would eventually seat four thousand people and cost twenty million dollars. Like Semple McPherson and others, Schuller was quick to use radio as an evangelizing tool; however, he soon found that television would become his most effective medium. By 1983, his weekly television broadcast The Hour of Power would reach over two million homes.53

The history of the Crystal Cathedral, and Schuller’s church-building methods, are clearly reminiscent of the megachurch movement. Theologically, Schuller occupies an interesting place in the evangelical nebula. He is the unofficial heir to Norman Vincent Peale’s “Positive Thinking” theology—although Schuller prefers “Possibility Thinking.” As such, Schuller’s ministry has a marked self-help orientation. With books like the bestselling Self Esteem, Schuller blends evangelical theology with popular psychology, and emphasizes a “non-judgmental” God, who specializes in “loving sinners.”54 Many megachurches may tout positively spun messages,

54 Anker, Self Help and Popular Religion, 152.
and many even jump into the muddy waters of popular psychology. Megachurch theology tends to favor more fundamentalist views of God, salvation, sin, and scripture. Yet there are distinctive parallels between Robert Schuller and Rick Warren, both methodologically and theologically. The following chapter will explore what these two men have in common, and how Warren’s career may have been shaped by Schuller’s presence in the evangelical category.

There is a common claim that Jerry Falwell’s Thomas Road Baptist Church and Liberty Bible School (later Liberty University) in Lynchburg, Virginia, qualifies as a megachurch. Yet if one defines a megachurch by religious marking, Thomas Road’s inclusion in the category, despite its size is questionable. Thomas Road under Falwell rarely sought to engage in culturally responsive marketing; rather it positioned itself as a fundamentalist bulwark in an increasingly secular world. Thomas Road, unlike Calvary, Willow Creek, or Saddleback, never sought to be part of “the world.” Rather, it sought to offer an alternative to it. Falwell’s ministry, like his church, did not aim to bring the evangelical message into step with the greater culture or to market the evangelical message to a target demographic. Rather, Falwell seemed determined to bring “the world” or at least, American culture, back to a time (however mythical) when the evangelical message didn’t need marketing. That said, one might successfully argue that Thomas Road has joined the megachurch movement by adopting more cultural responsive tactics in the past decade—particularly since the decline of Falwell’s influence and after his death.

The megachurch movement does not have one origin, but many. It is the result of evangelical leaders in various parts of the United States responding to broad social and cultural changes. One such leader was Chuck Smith. Although he helped to create the paradigm, his own church did not set out to be a megachurch. Smith fell into his methods of culturally specific marketing through his encounters with another evangelical movement called the Jesus Movement. Although he would quickly come to employ these methods more intentionally, at the start he was, in many ways, in the right place at the right time.

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When one sits in the nearly stadium-sized “Worship Center” (or sanctuary) at Rick Warren’s Saddleback Church amidst affluent Orange County suburbanites, it is difficult to imagine the counter-culture revolutionaries of the late 1960s as their religious forbears. Yet Saddleback does owe a great deal to the counterculture. In the late 1960s, the baby-boom generation changed the religious climate of the United States dramatically by demanding a
personalized place in the American religious landscape. It may sound paradoxical that a time of
cultural liberalism gave rise to a fundamentalist Christian movement, but the counter-culture and
the fledgling evangelical fervor that would eventually lead to the megachurch movement arose
out of the same void: the need for meaning.

Wade Clark Roof notes in *A Generation of Seekers* that many members of the “boomer”
generation found themselves disillusioned with the religious (and political, and social)
establishments of previous generations and eventually grew disillusioned with their own counter-
culture solutions. Many boomers regarded traditional Protestant institutions as bastions of
hypocrisy, perpetuated by unfounded and meaningless denominational loyalty. The anti-
liturgical sentiments were motivated, in part, by a felt lack of authenticity in liturgy.
Authenticity, as the boomer generation articulated it, seemed contingent upon informal, personal,
or even ecstatic experience. The sentiment was that true communion had been bridled by
church politics, liturgy, structure, and ritual. Rather than attempting to revive the old institutions
from within, many baby-boomers simply abandoned the mainline. Some looked to eastern
mysticism for a personal experience of the divine, some took hallucinogenic drugs, and some
joined the Jesus Movement.

The Jesus Movement was a grassroots evangelical movement that blended counterculture
antiestablishmentarianism with fundamentalist theology. “Jesus People” mirrored the
demographics of the hippie movement—they were young, educated, mostly white, and although
many came from middle-class or affluent backgrounds, most lived a form of voluntary poverty
as a consequence of their suspicion of material wealth and their aversion to post-war
consumerism. What separated Jesus People from their hippie counterparts was their ardent
commitment to evangelical Christianity.

The Jesus Movement’s aim was to revive first century Christianity—or rather, first
century Christianity as imagined by young twentieth century Californians. They eschewed
traditional liturgy, and denominationalism and recast the figure of Jesus as the epitome of their
own cultural values. Jesus became the first social dropout, the ultimate rebel, the quintessential
counterculture revolutionary; indeed, Jesus became the proto-hippie. Many Jesus People were

56 Roof, *Seekers*, 37.
57 Roof, *Seekers*, 12.
former drug addicts who credited their recovery to the Jesus Movement’s rigid evangelicalism. Others saw the movement as a way of reconciling the Protestant Christianity of their families of origin with their new social and political values. The Jesus People met on beaches or in parks and aggressively evangelized to a subculture many evangelical leaders had written off as hopelessly lost.

The anti-establishment life became a daunting imperative for the young counterculture generation. They had shaken off the social constructs of the post-World War II era, but the Age of Aquarius had not dawned as promised. When addiction and political and social unrest caused the counter-culture to lose faith in its own rebellion, many of the boomers looked to the Jesus Movement and its strict moral codes and “genuine” religious experience, all of which were free from hierarchy and bureaucracy.

The Jesus Movement was an inherently disorganized outburst of religious expression that, had it not been for Chuck Smith, would have quickly disappeared with the hippies. Indeed, the Jesus Movement itself did burn out with the counterculture, but Smith’s congregation, culled from that movement, did not. Smith recognized that traditional ministerial methods were not going to reach this new generation—yet he struggled with what would. Although eventually Smith became known as a founder of the megachurch movement, unlike Bill Hybels and Rick Warren, he did not start out intending to build an empire. Smith admits that when he served as a minister at an International Church of the Foursquare Gospel, the youth of the 1960s and 1970s were not his intended congregation at all.

According to “Pastor Chuck,” as he is known today, he came to lead the Jesus Movement (and to take his congregation beyond it) in spite of himself. According to Smith, he and wife would often drive out to the nearby beach to pray (in their car) for the youth who collected there. He had no intention of actually engaging this socially subversive subculture until his daughter brought home some new friends—members of the counterculture demographic who had had born-again experiences. According to Smith, this was the catalyst for the rest of his ministry. “One day it happened, I met several youths who were ‘hippies,’ …yet, these dirty, long-haired freaks… had a different glow on their faces. They were Christians.”58 According to his own accounts, Smith struggled at first with how much cultural accommodation he was willing to

make. Smith, after all, was not a baby boomer, and the clean-cut minister had to decide if he was willing to forgo many of the cultural codes he associated with his faith. Smith ultimately decided that it did not matter if his congregation sang to music from acoustic guitar or from an organ; it was the evangelical message that mattered. “Let us never be guilty,” Smith later wrote, “of forcing our western Christian sub-culture of clean shaven short hair styles or dress on anyone… We want the change to come from the inside out.” With this call, he began his culturally-responsive ministry and ushered in a new paradigm of church building.

Through the early 1970s, a small group of young people worshiping in Smith’s home became a congregation that established communal residences for new converts, acquired real estate, and baptized tens of thousands in the Pacific Ocean at the Corona Del Mar State Beach. Smith’s rallies and “pray-ins” drew huge crowds of young seekers, recovering drug-addicts, counter-culture activists, and homeless “hippies,” all gathering to hear a fundamentalist, evangelical message. At these gatherings and at his church, Chuck Smith emphasized the “experience of Christianity”—an action-oriented theology and a visceral and bodily experience of faith many counterculture seekers craved.

As the decades passed, Calvary lived out the megachurch myth of exponential and seemingly unstoppable growth. But Smith remained in touch with his congregation and with the needs and social codes of his intended target. As the hippies of the counter culture grew up and became more established, Calvary went with them. Eventually, it abandoned the ocean baptisms and beach services, although some of the youth groups are reviving the practice today. By the mid-eighties, Smith was preaching to a new generation of young Californians with a new set of social values: rebellion was replaced with consumerism, and Cavalry adapted. Electric guitars replaced acoustic ones, the charismatic elements of worship were toned down, and the church took on a more mainstream, albeit still very casual, feel. When Costa Mesa became more ethnically diverse in the 80s and 90s, Smith and his staff began broadening their target to the

60 Smith. *Harvest*, 22.
non-English speaking population growing around them. Spanish, as well Filipino and Korean language services were added and quickly filled up.

As of 2009, Calvary Chapel is a thriving megachurch with over a dozen programs and services each week, many catering to non-English speaking markets, and an extensive small group network. The Costa Mesa campus hosts an elementary and secondary school, the Calvary Bible College, and a radio station. Further, there are over six hundred Calvary Chapel affiliate branch-churches in cities and towns from Costa Mesa to Connecticut to Calcutta.63

The Jesus Movement dwindled away with the counterculture, but in the 1980s the consumer culture was booming, and a young businessman turned minister named Bill Hybels was about to build a church to suit the new cultural trends. Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, Illinois was one of the first and most influential megachurches. Willow Creek, like Calvary (and Saddleback for that matter) expended a great deal of energy and resources cultivating a culturally reflexive and relevant image for its target market. Willow Creek’s own mission statement tells visitors that its aim is be a “church that speaks the language of our modern culture.”64 Of course, the cultural language of Costa Mesa and South Barrington are slightly different, and worship at Willow Creek feels very unlike worship at Cavalry Chapel.

Willow Creek Community Church is not a child of the counter culture, and it does not cater to a Southern California beach community. The diverse and casual congregation of Calvary Chapel today might not feel comfortable as members of the Midwestern, suburban Willow Creek. Its target market has different needs and desires. In stark contrast to the somewhat disorganized birth of Calvary, Willow Creek was famously inspired by a market research survey. Where Chuck Smith discovered his seeker-centered methods through trial and error, intuition, and casual communication, Bill Hybels shaped the foundations of church via sophisticated demographic research. While Calvary Chapel became an organized, target-focused establishment as the megachurch ethos began to take hold, Willow Creek was born that way. Willow Creek was arguably the first completely intentional seeker-centered church.

In 1975, as a student at Trinity International University in Deerfield, Illinois, Bill Hybels embarked on a project that would come to define a new era in American evangelical history. Hybels was a religious entrepreneur, an evangelical pastor well-steeped in American consumer

63 Smith. Harvest, 16.
64 http://www.willowcreek.org/MiniSite/story.asp?storyid=1
culture and armed with a business degree and knack for marketing. Hybels understood that even the best products don’t sell themselves. What is true for breakfast cereal is true for salvation: packaging matters. He also knew that pitching an untested campaign to an unscreened demographic was bad business sense and often resulted in failure. So Hybels did what successful entrepreneurs do: he found out what his target market wanted church to be, and then he gave it to them. Willow Creek is the result: a church with custom packaging to appeal to those Hybels called the “unchurched Harrys and unchurched Marys” of suburban Chicago.65

On October 12th, 1975, approximately one hundred young adults and teens gathered for the first service held in the Willow Creek Theater in Palatine, Illinois. By early 1977, the number had jumped to over a thousand, and the congregation purchased ninety acres in South Barrington, Illinois. By 1982, a modern, state of the art theater-style worship space was completed. Within the next two years, seating had to be expanded. A youth education wing was added, as was a chapel and two thousand more seats. Yet by 1988, the weekend attendance was near eleven thousand and new renovations were desperately needed. Willow Creek simply could not build fast enough—by the time a new expansion was completed, another was needed. In 1992, Willow Creek doubled in size, reconfiguring the worship space to accommodate more seats, adding a food court, a gym and dozens of new classrooms, conference spaces, and nurseries. Today, fifteen thousand people visit Willow Creek’s Barrington Campus each weekend and many others attend the five satellite campuses across the Chicago metro area.

Hybels’ research uncovered that his suburban demographic had a desire for a religious life but avoided church for precise, addressable reasons. Why did Harry and Mary stay home? Church was boring. Their kids didn’t enjoy church, and they didn’t want to spend their leisure time forcing their resistant children into dress clothes. Additionally, they were reticent to dress up on the weekends themselves. Also, religious symbols made them uncomfortable, and denominational loyalties made them feel as if they didn’t belong. They preferred to remain anonymous when attending a new church for the first time, and they did not like being asked for money.66

At Willow Creek, dress is casual. Although not as casual as at Calvary or Saddleback, at Willow Creek services, jeans are not out of place. First-time attendees can easily blend into the

65 Balmer, Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory, 115.
66 Randall Balmer, Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory, 14.
massive crowd and take their seats anonymously in the spacious, iconography-free auditorium. Very little audience participation is required throughout the service, which is a comfort to those unfamiliar with the sequence of events. The sermon is always brief, relevant, often amusing, and laced with metaphors and allusions to the corporate world, finance, the Internet, and joys and difficulties of suburban family life. When the time comes for offering baskets to be passed, newcomers are expressly told that they are “guests.” The Willow Creek services are precisely timed, well-polished, and rehearsed well in advance. Willow Creek’s services have a less impromptu tone than Calvary, although both have an air of informality and stress authenticity (no matter how well-rehearsed).

Where Smith and other Calvary pastors are careful to speak to the non-conformist spirits of the Southern Californians in their congregation, Hybels punctuates his sermons with corporate language like “cost/benefit,” “return on investment,” and “bottom line.” Although his focus remains on individuals, he will often use familiar “team work” metaphors, reminiscent of corporate morale building campaigns.67

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Theologically, megachurches occupy various corners of the evangelical category, although many fall within the fundamentalist category. Most hold to similar basic theological tenets. Although they may use different language, most megachurch statements of belief will purport that salvation is given through God’s grace when one accepts Jesus as one’s savior. Most megachurches also hold to the imperative to evangelize and to some form of Biblical inerrancy. Some may claim that the Bible is literally true; others may qualify this claim with “in its original manuscripts,” allowing for some flexibility. Megachurch leaders usually avoid eschatology; however, most hold to a premillennial dispensationalist theology. Some megachurches utilize Prosperity Gospel theology—the notion that spiritual righteousness is rewarded with material gain. Perhaps due to a legacy of discrimination and economic disenfranchisement, many predominantly African American megachurches fall into this category. But despite statements of faith, in practice most megachurches avoid discussing difficult or controversial theological concepts in public services, opting instead to focus on the Bible’s practical applications and on its ability to offer comfort and guidance for common challenges of ordinary life.

67 Hybels, Sermon, September 17, 2006.
The focus on marketing has, perhaps ironically, sheltered megachurches from many of the ramifications of the “culture wars” of the 1970s and 80s. As outlined in the previous chapter, the rise of the religious right and the growth of its political influence had serious repercussions for evangelicals in the United States. During this tumultuous period, it seemed as though evangelical theology had been consumed by a narrow scope of hot-button issues, namely, conflicts over sexuality (e.g., homosexuality, pornography), abortion, and public school curricula. Despite the fact that, according to their statements of faith, most megachurches fall theologically in line with the fundamentalism of the religious right, their careful avoidance of divisive theological and political issues gave them a guise of inclusivity that safeguarded their popularity. As a result, when the religious right began to wane at the turn of the twenty-first century, when the evangelical discourse (and the wider American culture) seemed to tire of their inflammatory and reactionary rhetoric, megachurches remained relatively unaffected.

In an attempt to accommodate the new distaste for the politically charged theology of the religious right, some megachurch leaders have begun to actively steer the movement toward a globally conscious and politically balanced agenda. At the helm of this shift is Rick Warren. Via his best selling book, Warren effectively blended evangelical theology with a distinctively secular self-help message. However, the goal of Warren’s ministry is not simply to blend self-help with religion. Warren’s unprecedented popularity and success has arguably made him the de facto leader of both the megachurch movement and the evangelical community, and he is using his leadership role to take both groups in new directions. Warren has tackled issues such as AIDS, climate change, and global poverty—causes previously untouchable by evangelical pastors. Warren’s ministry is as complex and dynamic as Warren himself. Many of his efforts suggest that he is attempting to lead American evangelicals into a more globally conscious and inclusive period; indeed, that he is providing new ways of being an evangelical in America. The following chapter will unpack Warren’s ministry, and address some of the many questions posed by his leadership in the megachurch movement and greater evangelical community.
Chapter 3: Rick Warren: Megachurch Pastor, Innovator, Mogul

On January 20, 2009 the world watched as the forty-fourth President of the United States was sworn into office—but before Barack Obama took the oath, he bowed his head and prayed with the nation, and with Rick Warren. Warren has been called “America's most influential spiritual leader,” and his church has been dubbed “the epicenter of a spiritual shockwave.”  

*Time Magazine* has named Warren one of the “15 World Leaders Who Matter Most” and one of the “100 Most Influential People in the World.” In his three decades of ministry, Warren has arguably earned these titles. But what is the “shockwave,” and where is he leading?

Warren cannot be simply described as a successful megachurch pastor, or just as a bestselling author. In fact, the question of how to categorize Warren is difficult to answer. He has few, if any, parallels within the evangelical community. In terms of the scope of his influence and the breath of his “empire,” Warren has more in common with Robert Murdock or Bill Gates than with Bill Hybels or Chuck Smith. *Forbes Magazine* described Warren’s Saddleback Church as “comparable to Dell, Google, or Starbucks,” and named his *The Purpose Driven Church* the “best book on entrepreneurship, management, and leadership in print.” With all of the above in mind, perhaps the best descriptor for Rick Warren is one generally found outside the study of religion: *mogul.*

In his own words, Warren is a “global strategist.” He is attempting to refocus the evangelical agenda (in so far as a cohesive agenda exists) away from the domestically focused and politically divisive issues that dominated evangelical culture during the 1980s and 90s, and towards more globally conscious and seemingly more inclusive ends. Warren hopes that this shift will provide Americans, and American evangelicals in particular, with new priorities. He argues, “God gave the church the internet to bring His global family together, and to give us the tools to defeat the global giants, like poverty, disease, illiteracy and spiritual emptiness.”

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72 Interview with Ann Curry, NBC *Dateline*, December 19, 2008.
He calls this shift “a second reformation” and believes that it will mobilize Christians of all denominations worldwide to defeat poverty and disease, strengthen local communities, and deepen individual religious practice and belief. Further, he argues that this shift will deepen the “spiritual lives” of all people, of any or even no religious affiliation. Whether or not his initiatives are ushering in a “second reformation” is not a question that can be addressed here. The argument presented here is that, “reformation” or not, Warren’s ministry is attempting to rebrand both the evangelical culture and the megachurch culture in the United States. That rebranding will certainly have political and cultures consequences; it may also have theological ones. In many ways, he is already succeeding. Yet in some instances, it is unclear how his new articulation of evangelical (and evangelical megachurch) priorities will coexist with the older ones.

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In 2005, at the twenty-fifth anniversary of Saddleback Church, Rick Warren wanted to thank his entire congregation. He wanted to “speak to the whole Saddleback family” at once. The only facility nearby that could accommodate everyone was Angel Stadium of Anaheim. In his trademarked Hawaiian shirt and Birkenstocks, he generously thanked his congregation. “You are the most amazing church in America, and I love you!” he shouted. Then he suggested, “I want to do a wave!” The massive congregation enthusiastically obliged.

Rick Warren is undeniably affable. He’s a large man with a goatee, a receding hairline, and a kind smile. He hugs easily, and he greets parishioners and presidential candidates alike with casual warmth. He dresses and speaks informally, insisting everyone call him by his first name. Despite his ability to gather national leaders at a moment’s notice and fill whole sports stadiums, he seems like just a “regular guy.” He has repeatedly confessed his weakness for junk food, his fondness for classic rock music, and his propensity for organized chaos. “If you don’t like organized religion,” he often jokes “come to Saddleback, we’re disorganized religion!” He prefers big pictures and grand plans to detailed projections, and he creates an acronym for every

73 Dateline, December 19, 2008.
74 Gladwell, “The Cellular Church”
75 Warren, Church, 127.
project or point he wants anyone to remember. Most notably, he seems to possess a boundless sense of possibility. As one journalist put it, “he is momentum incarnate.”

Warren has more theological education than many megachurch pastors. He obtained a Bachelor of Arts degree from California Baptist College, a Master of Divinity from Southwestern Theological Seminary, and a Doctor of Ministry degree from Fuller Theological Seminary. However, his most noteworthy accomplishments have been non-academic. His books have set publishing records and the Purpose Programs they inspired reach far outside American evangelical culture. Warren has risen to a leadership position of his own making, on his own terms. He has managed to become the spokesperson for evangelicals in the United States—a group that historically has recoiled at hierarchy and defied unified leadership. Through his own church and his church-building book, The Purpose Driven Church, Warren came to be the unofficial leader of the megachurch movement. He has created global information-sharing networks among megachurch and would-be megachurch pastors, and has contributed some of the movement’s most successful target-marketing tactics. But perhaps more important, he has crafted his leadership role around new priorities, and he is articulating those priorities successfully to those he has come to lead.

It is possible that the previous attempt to define a megachurch failed to underscore the importance of an essential characteristic of megachurch pastors: ambition. Whether their dreams of ever-expanding churches are fulfilled by divine will, as many megachurch pastors are eager to claim, or simply by good luck and savvy marketing, megachurch pastors dream big. Upon returning to his native California to start his own church, Rick Warren was no different. Indeed, the visions of Hybels and Smith were paltry in comparison. From his books, to his church, to his pastor networks, to his political and philanthropic ambitions, Warren has never done anything in a small way.

In 1980, when Warren left Texas to plant a “church for the unchurched” in Southern California, he and his wife Kay had a four-month-old baby, no savings, nowhere to live, no congregation to lead, and few contacts in the area—and, yet, Warren was sure of his eventual success. He writes, “I knew God was calling me to lead a great church.” Indeed, Warren seems to have envisioned the scope of Saddleback, in one form or another, from the very beginning of

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76 The Economist, August 18, 2008.
77 Warren, Church, 11.
his career. In March of 1980, Warren announced to a fledgling congregation of sixty people at Laguna Hills High School that he envisioned “welcoming 20,000 members into the fellowship of this church family.”\textsuperscript{78} Nearly three decades later, Warren surpassed his goal. What began as a meeting of sixty blossomed into a 120-acre campus with 22,000 weekly attendees, an average of 1,500 new baptisms per year, and four successful satellite campuses.

If a megachurch is (in part) defined by its embrace of the prevailing culture, Saddleback’s place in the category is unquestionable. Even in its origins, Saddleback was a product of Southern California’s real estate and development-driven economy. The first relationship Warren established in Southern California was with a real estate agent named Don Dale. Dale secured the Warren family’s first apartment and soon became the first member of their church. Later, he brokered the Lake Forest campus land acquisition. The Lake Forest campus purchase is one of many examples of Warren’s grand vision. Warren insisted on buying a massive tract of land even though the church could only afford to build on thirty percent of it. Twenty-five years and nearly seventy million dollars later, Saddleback fills the 120-acre property, just as Warren envisioned it would.

As at most megachurches, worship at Saddleback downplays formal liturgy, but is easy to follow. The biblical passages used to illustrate the message of the sermon are pre-printed on the programs next to a lined space for note taking. Unlike Willow Creek, congregants are not granted the luxury of being passive observers. Warren will often ask congregants to reflect on a personal matter related to the topic of his address, and to make a list or write down a thought or goal for the week in a provided space on the program.

As at Willow Creek and Cavalry Chapel, small groups have a primary role at Saddleback. Warren has called them “the engine of the church.”\textsuperscript{79} As noted in the previous chapter, small groups successfully solve the problem of intimacy in a megachurch; they foster community and reinforce an individual’s commitment to the larger church’s agenda. In Saddleback’s first few years, Warren intended to increase the number of small groups by three hundred. He claims that God told him he was “off by a zero.”\textsuperscript{80} Warren increased the number of small groups by three thousand, and today Saddleback has a network of small groups that (although constantly in flux)

\textsuperscript{78} Balmer, \textit{Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory}, 327.
\textsuperscript{79} Warren, \textit{Church}, 175.
\textsuperscript{80} Warren, \textit{Church}, 45.
is estimated in the range of five thousand and is overseen by a specifically-designated ministerial team.

Obviously, in terms of size, Warren’s church falls squarely within the megachurch category. However, if one considers the central characteristic, target-specific marketing, Saddleback exemplifies the paradigm. Warren has literally written the book on target-specific church growth. *The Purpose Driven Church* is an instruction manual for pastors interested in replicating Saddleback’s success. In it, Warren spells out exactly how Saddleback implemented many of the megachurch tactics discussed in the previous chapter. The book has a chapter on selecting music, another on architecture, one on creating a “seeker-friendly” church culture, and one on avoiding ideas and concepts the “unchurched” find unattractive. Above all, the book stresses the value of personalization, detailed demographic research, and a well-defined target market.

The aim of *The Purpose Driven Church* is to export Saddleback’s success, Warren never claims to be solely responsible for his church’s boom. Warren’s book upholds the fundamentals of the megachurch etiological myth, while recognizing the importance of human agency: “Saddleback’s growth is a sovereign act of God, which cannot be repeated. However, we should extract the lessons and principles that are transferable. To ignore what God has taught our church would be unwise stewardship.” Warren goes on to argue that although Saddleback’s success was a miraculous unfolding of God’s will, there are some administrative tactics that can be easily exported to the benefit of other churches.

One megachurch characteristic Warren endorses is the post-denominational model. Warren was educated at two Southern Baptist institutions, and his church is a member of the Southern Baptist Convention. Yet the word “Baptist” does not appear on the Saddleback Church sign, or on its website, or in any of its literature. “Today’s generation has very little brand loyalty,” Warren writes. Saddleback conducted a series of surveys and learned that the church had little to gain and much to lose by advertising its denominational affiliation. Where “few people choose a church based on denominational loyalty,” a sizable portion of his target market reported that “they would never even consider visiting a southern Baptist congregation.”

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82 Warren, *Church*, 199.
Megachurches, or “successful churches,” Warren argues, “take the hang-ups of their targets seriously.”

Saddleback’s denominational affiliation is more of a liability than an asset. Warren decided to remain a member of the SBC, but not to publicize his church’s membership. “I could spend years,” he writes, “educating the community about what the SBC really stood for before I got them to visit our church, or I could clear up the misconceptions after they accepted Christ. We choose the second option.”

Like Hybels, Warren carefully studied his target market and built his church in accordance with their needs. Where Hybels organizes around his “unchurched Harrys and Marys,” in *The Purpose Driven Church*, Warren defines his target market through the description of a prototypical member: Saddleback Sam. As mentioned the previous chapter, Saddleback Sam is a highly effective construct Saddleback’s ministerial staff uses to understand its target market. According to Warren, “Saddleback Sam” is the typical “unchurched” man of Southern Orange County that Warren wants to reach. He is the personified prototypical attendee of Saddleback Church and Warren has imagined him in exceptional detail:

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84 Warren, *Church*, 199.
The diagram is only part of Warren’s lengthy description of Sam. Warren contends that knowing one’s target is paramount to successful ministry. “What deer hunter would stand on top of a hill and shoot randomly into the valley without taking aim at something? Without a target, our efforts at evangelism are often only wishful thinking…the more your target is in focus, the more likely it is that you will be able to hit it.”

Warren has suffered some criticism for the similarities between his ministry’s strategies and those of secular consumer advertising. Liberal-leaning media outlets like The New York Times, The Los Angeles Times, and The Huffington Post have taken swipes at Warren’s megachurch strategies, but the tone of such articles seems more amused than substantively critical. The substantive disapproval emanates largely from evangelical churches and church...

85 Warren, Church, 172.
leaders who argue that the “seeker-sensitive” megachurch model is compromising piety and discipline for the sake of entertainment. They argue that Warren’s attempts to be “relevant” cause him to accommodate and encourage a culture that suffers from a narcissistic need for personalization. Critics charge that by “speaking the idiom of the culture” as fluently as Warren does, he is indulging a culture that focuses on personal psychological and material needs and bristles at rigorous or demanding theologies. Tactics like Saddleback Sam, and culturally responsive sermon topics have come under some fire on conservative evangelical blogs, on talk radio, and, to a lesser degree, in print. Due to Warren’s popularity, these critiques have not gained much traction. Warren has defended his tactics as “evangelizing strategies, not theological compromises.”

In The Purpose Driven Life, Warren argues that the “best style of worship is the one that most authentically represents your love for God, based on the background and personality God gave you.” He admits that some evangelicals find his methods “shallow,” but he argues that they simply misunderstand his mission because “they are not my target.”

He remains undaunted by his critics. As Warren puts it, the “misunderstanding of other Christians is a small price to pay for winning thousands to Christ.”

Further, Warren argues that his methods are neither modern nor innovative. He claims that his are the tactics Jesus used to attract crowds and suggests, “the first words of Jesus’ ministry are ‘come and see.’ Well, there’s no commitment there, just ‘come and check me out.’” Warren goes on to claim that, in the following three years of Jesus’ ministry, he incrementally “turned up the heat” or demanded more commitment until he was able to ask people to “take up the cross” with him. “What I do is start where people are, but I don’t leave them there.” Warren argues that although his methods may seem shallow, it is because he is contending with meeting the immediate needs of an unchurched population. Once those needs have been met, he argues, individuals can move into more substantive and eventually ministerial and leadership positions on their “spiritual journey.”

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86 Warren, Church, 199.
87 Warren, Life, 102.
88 Warren, Church, 199.
89 Warren, Church, 300.
Saddleback is not just a paradigmatic megachurch—it is leading the movement. Warren has been the architect of some of the movement’s most successful growth-fostering strategies. “Venues” are one Saddleback innovation Warren has exported to countless other churches, including Willow Creek. Venues are essentially different worship spaces under the central church auspice, each with its own distinctive feel and musical style. Through venues, Saddleback’s identity can be multi-faceted and can offer target-specific options to a variety of targets. Rather than being one “type” of church, venues allow the Saddleback to be everything to everyone. Whatever kind of “worship experience” you are in the market for, you can find it at Saddleback.

Scattered across the Saddleback campus are colorful posters reminiscent of shopping mall directories that inform visitors of their venue options. The posters encourage visitors to experience “Saddleback Your Style.” College students have their own venue, as do the high school, middle school, elementary school, and pre-school-aged attendees. Age-specific programming is an important part of Saddleback’s target marking.

A disproportionate number of Saddleback attendees have school-age children. More than three thousand people under the age of seventeen pass through Saddleback every weekend. Warren and his team of strategists realized that children are the centerpieces of many suburban families; if the children look forward to attending a church, the parents will probably become more involved. Conversely, if a church does not offer something for every member of the family, it will not succeed in maintaining the parents. As Warren writes, “If you want to attract young couples, quality children’s programming is key.”

Saddleback’s “All Stars” venue, for elementary and middle school aged children, is a three-story building that boasts an extensive salt-water aquarium, a terrarium with five iguanas, ten full sized arcade-style video games, and twenty-five X-Box stations. “The Student Zone” is the space for high school attendees. It contains its own worship center, café, study rooms, lounge, and arcade.

Although most megachurches have elaborate youth programs, Warren’s venues take this kind of specialization even further. The “Saddleback Your Style” directories also point the way to a plethora of “worship experiences” for attendees of any age. These options are structured

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91 Warren, *Church*, 192.
92 This information is taken from a visit to Saddleback in April, 2005.
around the type of music offered and are mainly held in large “tents” that resemble airplane hangers. Aside from the main service in the Worship Center, visitors can attend “Overdrive” for a “Hard rockn’ worship experience,” with electric guitars and concert-style light shows. If you prefer something less electronic, “PRAISE!” is a gospel-music service with an emphasis on congregational singing. “Traditions” features traditional Protestant hymns and is held in the “Saddleback Chapel,” a Spanish mission-style church often used for weddings and funerals. Then there is the “Ohana” venue, which calls to those who want to “get away to the islands” with “Hawaiian inspired worship.” Each of these services takes place in a space specifically decorated for each theme, including features such as chain link fencing, smoke machines, and fake graffiti for the “Overdrive” worshippers and tiki torches for the “Ohana” crowd. Of course, one can also watch the service over coffee at the open-air “Terrace Café,” where flat-screen televisions are mounted in nearly every corner. This kind of specialization ensures that every visitor can choose the exact experience he or she desires on any given week. As the directories say, “There’s something for everyone at Saddleback.”

An administrative barrier inevitably emerges as a result of personalizing worship style to this degree. Normally, supporting eight different adult venues would necessitate an extensive ministerial staff, and although Saddleback could ostensibly fund such an initiative, Rick Warren is one of the most powerful draws of the church. The success of the *Purpose Driven Life* has launched him into celebrity status, and his congregants, regardless of their worship tastes, look forward to his plainspoken messages and casual confidence. Therefore, no matter which service one attends at Saddleback (with the exception of the children’s programs), “Pastor Rick” delivers the sermon in his trademarked sandals and Hawaiian shirt. In the main worship center he appears in person, whereas at the other venues he is wired in via a closed circuit connection and appears on mammoth television screens. In this form, he can be wherever he is required.

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93 These passages were quoted directly from the directory in April, 2005.
94 This passage is taken from a Saddleback directory and church map pamphlet. April 2005.
95 The word ‘sermon’ is rarely used at Saddleback for fear of intimidating newcomers who may uncomfortable with traditional forms of worship and/or the traditional vocabulary. “Message” is the more common term.
Another Warren tactic now being used across the megachurch movement is “Speaking in Series.” Speaking in series was born largely out of the success of *The Purpose Drive Life*, which is a forty-day program. Speaking in series essentially means centering sermon topics, developing curricula, printing literatures, forming small groups, organizing service projects, and often orchestrating nearly all church activities around a specific theme for a four to eight week period—thus creating a “series.”

Warren argues that speaking in series creates “a sense of anticipation” and gives newcomers a chance to “sample what the church has to offer within a meaningful time frame with a finite end date.” If a newcomer arrives at the beginning of a series (Warren also advises announcing a new series on high visitor days like Easter), he will often stay for the duration. He may even join a small group and at the end of the sequence he may become a member of the church. Since every service is an integral part of a forty-day structure, every worship service is infused with importance. The idea is that an overarching value such as “purpose” or “community” is explored through a six week, or forty-day program. Each week has a different, smaller theme that fits into the grander schema and is explored through the worship message, and a given set of group and personal activities. The structure provides momentum and an immediate goal. It keeps participants focused on the church and how its message is playing out in their own personal lives.

During “40 Days of Community,” aside from attending the regular worship services, attendees were asked to organize themselves into small groups. These groups were largely age and lifestyle specific; single moms formed groups with other single moms, newlyweds with other newlyweds, and the like. The groups were relatively easy to form via the “40 Days of Purpose small group finder” on the church website. They were asked to choose a project that contributed to the community, to execute that project for forty days, and to document their experiences. Some chose to pray for sick church members, others volunteered at soup kitchens or at domestic violence shelter; some organized clothing and food drives, beach cleanups, while others simply committed to performing “random acts of kindness.”

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96 It is possible that Warren did not invent this tactic; however it has become part an integral of the Rick Warren/ Saddleback method of church building outlined in his books and popularized via his workshops. The 40-day series in particular has come to be associated almost exclusively with Warren and with the Purpose Program.

97 Warren, *Church*, 300.
If a group had a hard time organizing or choosing a project, guidance was available. A team of Saddleback’s ministerial staff is designated for each series, and (depending on the series) DVD curricula are available for free. The end of each series is marked by celebration and reflection. The last week in a series is usually entirely devoted to video slide shows, testimonies, new baptisms, and many promises to keep going in whatever the endeavor of the series was.

Megachurches nationwide have used series with great success. Series often take over the programs, and even the physical space of the churches that employ them. The Vineyard Community Church in Cincinnati, Ohio, for example, recently completed a series entitled “The Call,” focused on “God’s call for your life.” A handbook was printed, DVDs were made, and hundreds of discussion-oriented small groups were formed. Throughout its eight-week duration, everything from the church’s main stage to napkins at the café carried images of stylized telephones and the words “THE CALL.” Similarly, Hope Chapel in Hermosa Beach, California recently completed a series called “Light of the World,” meant to encourage service and evangelism. Light bulbs abounded, and more than five hundred new small groups were formed in conjunction with the series.

Although many megachurches have borrowed Warren’s series-speaking tactic, what is more significant is the number of non-megachurch and even non-evangelical congregations that have completed a Warren series. “40-Days of Purpose” (based on the bestselling The Purpose Driven Life) was so successful at Saddleback that Warren adapted the materials and made the curriculum available to other churches and institutions. Over 30,000 churches in the United States completed the “Purpose Program.” With “40 Days of Purpose,” Warren reached outside the megachurch community, outside the evangelical community, and even outside the religious community. “40 Days of Purpose” has been taken up Catholic congregations, mainline congregations like 345-year-old First Presbyterian Church in Jamaica, Queens, and by corporate entities such as The Coca-Cola Company, Ford Motor Company, NASCAR, LGPA, and the United States Air Force.

Warren does not describe his church as a megachurch. He does not even see its mission as limited to evangelicals. Rather, he argues that his church is in a position to lead a “global reformation” to “reawaken and deepen the spiritual development of Christians…but not just
To further this reformation, Saddleback hosts a five-day conference for pastors and their spouses. The Purpose Driven Network Summit (formerly the Saddleback Ministry Conference) draws thousands of pastors from every denomination, from every size church, from all over the world. At the conference, Warren and his staff (including Kay Warren) hold workshops and lectures on Saddleback’s newest innovations, its responses to relevant topics like the economic downturn, global poverty, and AIDS, and how pastors can implement what they have learned. Pastors interested in Warren’s Purpose Driven initiatives can also make use of Pastors.com where they can form networks, share ideas, and sign up for Rick’s Ministry Tool Box. The “toolbox” is a listserv Warren uses every week to connect to a quarter of a million church leaders in nearly two hundred countries.

In addition to the conference, in January of 2008, Warren partnered with Reader’s Digest to launch The Purpose Driven Connection, a magazine and online forum. The Purpose Driven Connection is a traditional subscription-based magazine, a networking tool, and most significant, a forum where Warren’s newest series or initiatives can be made directly and immediately available to individuals, small groups, and church and community leaders.

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It is clear that Warren has outgrown the megachurch movement. He has come to lead it, and he has managed to reach beyond its scope. But has he done the same with the evangelical community? If so, what are the consequences of such a move? It is my argument that it is not that Warren is reaching beyond the evangelical nebula entirely but that he is perhaps stretching it to include initiatives not presently with in its scope and by so doing, he may change it for the next generation of American evangelicals. He is leading it in a new direction, giving it new vocabulary or at least new interpretations for old vocabulary, and new theological, and political priorities. How did Warren go from megachurch pastor to mogul? It all began with a book.

Saddleback Church is the seat of Rick Warren’s ministry, yet it represents only a small slice of his influence. The church reaches tens of thousands, but Warren’s books have reached millions. The success of The Purpose Driven Life set Warren apart from other megachurch pastors, both with the celebrity it garnered him and the messages it contributed to the evangelical discourse in the United States.

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As of 2008, *The Purpose Driven Life: What on Earth Am I Here For?* has sold over twenty-five million copies since its publication in 2002 and has been translated into fifty-six languages. Notably, the book has garnered popularity across denominational lines. There are few books with religious content read by both Pentecostals and Unitarians; *The Purpose Driven Life* has managed this heroic feat. For such a remarkable reception, the book at first glance is relatively unremarkable. It is a forty-chapter book, designed to be read over forty days. Its goal is to facilitate an answer to the question posed in the subtitle. Each chapter begins with a clear premise and ends with a question and a scriptural verse the reader is supposed to reflect/journal on. For example, the “Day 2” topic is, “You are not an accident.” In the four-page chapter, Warren expounds on the notion that each person is unique and valuable. The scriptural reference is Isaiah 44:2, and the question is, “What areas of my personality, background and physical appearance am I struggling to accept?”99 It is not overtly evangelical—it speaks of Mother Teresa and Mahatma Gandhi as spiritual role models, and although it encourages readers to accept Jesus as their savior and to find a church community, it does not fall into doctrinal particularities or encourage one type of church over others. In fact, Warren writes, "God won't ask [at the last judgment] about your religious background or doctrinal views. The only thing that will matter is, did you learn what Jesus did for you and did you learn to love him?”100 *The Purpose Driven Life* is essentially a broadly Christian self-help book, although Warren would disagree vehemently with the latter part of that description.

“It’s the anti-self help book,” Warren told Ann Curry of the *Today Show* in early 2003. Warren contends that the book is a response to the self-help publishing industry, which mistakenly tries to help readers by encouraging them to focus on themselves. He argues that conversely, his book teaches, “It’s not about you.” “It’s not about you” is in fact, the first line of the book. However, the second chapter is titled “You are not an accident” and subsequent chapters include, “What Drives Your Life?”, “You Were Made to Last Forever,” and “You Were Made for a Mission.” It claims to help readers answer the questions “Who am I?”, “Do I matter?”, and “What is my purpose in life?” Consider the following passages:

100 Warren, *Life*, 204.
Any time you reject any part of yourself, you are rejecting God’s wisdom and sovereignty in creating you. 101

Many people are driven by guilt ... [G]uilt-driven people are manipulated by memories, they allow their past to control their future. They often unconsciously punish themselves by sabotaging their own success.102

Gideon’s [from Judges] weakness was low self-esteem and deep insecurities… 103

Warren’s book seems just as focused on self-esteem as any secular self-help text. 104 The Purpose Driven Life is clearly about you; after all, whose life and whose purpose is it supposed to help reveal? But one should not conclude that Warren is being misleading when he claims that the book not self-focused. If we examine Warren’s ministry as a whole, we will discover that the contradictory message in the book is a consequence of Warren’s over-arching method of ministry.

Warren writes in The Purpose Driven Church that his goal as a pastor is to inspire his congregants to transcend the material values of their culture—he aims to “turn consumers into contributors.”105 Yet he has chosen a distinctively consumer-directed method by which to incite this transformation. He has even made his church architecturally resemble a shopping mall. He publicly chastises American culture at large for its selfishness, while championing a church model that that caters to the smallest whim and hang-up of the “unchurched.”106 In The Purpose Driven Life, he has undeniably written a book all about “you”; however, he claims to have done

102 Warren, Life, 27.
103 Warren, Life, 275.
104 Warren, Life, 24, 27.
105 Warren, Church, 136.
106 Warren has commented on “selfishness” in several places including in the following sermons: “The Mark of a Mature Person,” “A Faith That Works” and “How to Win Over Temptations” all of which are available on his website www.pastors.com. Further he has commented on “me-obsession” and “selfishness” in several televised interviews including Larry King Live (January 6, 2008) and The Sean Hannity Show (February 10, 2008.)
so to help people stop focusing on themselves and start focusing on God. Psychologists might call his method “meeting people where they are.” Megachurch pastors call it seeker-sensitive. Warren has claimed the methods to be the same as those Jesus himself used. Critics have described Warren’s approach as compromising. Some critics (largely on blogs and on talk radio) have charged Warren with blending evangelical Christianity with New Age ideas others have argued that his self-help tone glosses over unpopular biblical principles. For Warren, certain compromises are worth making if they bring people to Christ. "You can't have a reformation without somebody opposing it," Warren told the Associated Press. "If I wasn't making a difference, nobody would be paying attention." What worries some is that, given his influence, Warren’s choices regarding what to compromise on have a profound effect on millions of people.

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Warren’s comfort with self-help terminology is certainly uncomfortable for some in the evangelical community. However, it is not unprecedented. Robert Schuller’s ministry, for example, linked evangelical interpretations of sin and salvation to concepts like positive thinking and self-esteem. In *The Purpose Driven Life* and in public statements regarding his many other initiatives, Warren has reinterpreted some accepted evangelical vocabulary.

The first chapter offered parameters for the term evangelical. We will return briefly to some of them now to show how Warren may be offering new uses and interpretations of key vocabulary. Perhaps the best place to begin is with scripture.

In many ways (perhaps some more cultural than theological) Warren does not fit the fundamentalist model. He expressly denied that he is a fundamentalist to *Christianity Today*, stating rather harshly, “Fundamentalists of all faiths …are dangerous and narrow minded.”

Despite this rebuke, Warren does believe that the Bible is “inerrant.” Yet when asked in a debate with atheist author and neuroscientist Sam Harris, Warren stated that the “Bible is inerrant in what it claims to be. The Bible does not claim to be a scientific book in many areas.” Warren went on to state that he does not believe in evolution and that he believes that genesis is an

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43 “Rick Warren's Critics Include Other Evangelicals: Many Feel he's Not Conservative Enough, Even as Gays Call Him Prejudiced” *Associated Press*, Dec 22, 2008
accurate account of creation; however he failed to elaborate (in this interview or in other public statements) on what he meant by “what it [the Bible] claims to be” or on what areas he considers the Bible to be a scientific authority. However, we might gain some insight by looking at what Warren claims the Bible to be and how he uses it in his ministry.

Warren’s discussions on the Bible are practical and therapeutic—they describe the Bible as a tool, albeit the perfect tool, with which to craft a purpose-filled and happy life. Warren’s method of using scripture as a buttress rather than a foundation in his sermons is not unusual. He is certainly not the only megachurch pastor to use scripture as a gloss for a practical, culturally adaptive sermon topic, such as dealing with stress. Saddleback’s statement of faith, available on the church website, reveals an unusually practical and therapeutic view of the Bible. Where phrases like “God’s revealed truth,” “the Holy living Word,” and “inerrant and infallible” are common among evangelical churches and megachurches, Saddleback’s claim is that the Bible is, “God’s perfect guidebook for living.” This practical conception of scripture continues in The Purpose Driven Life, where Warren writes that “the Bible is our Owner’s Manual, explaining why we are alive, how life works, what to avoid and what to expect in our future.”

Warren takes a similarly therapeutic approach to the concept of sin. The word sin never appears in Saddleback’s statement of faith. Warren rarely mentions the word in his sermons. In a survey of twenty sermons in 2006, Warren mentioned the word sin only twice. As it connotes guilt, insecurity, and failure, sin is a relatively unpopular topic with the “unchurched.” Consequently, Warren avoids it where possible, or reworks the concept to make it seem more positive, less like a failure, more like an opportunity for future success.

In The Purpose Driven Life, he substitutes the term temptation for sin. Warren dedicates two of the forty chapters of his book to the concept of temptation, although the concept is discussed throughout. There is no chapter explicitly on sin. Unlike sin, temptation is not action, but the potential for action. “Every temptation is an opportunity to do good,” Warren writes. Temptation is an opportunity; it can be used to inspire better behavior. “Temptation is not a sign

111 These characterizations of scripture are taken from Billy Graham’s 1957 and 2001 New York Crusades. www.saddleback.com
of weakness or worldliness,” Warren reminds his readers.\textsuperscript{114} By focusing on temptation rather than sin, Warren is able to both exonerate his readers (as he reminds them, “Jesus was tempted”) and challenge them to do better. \textit{The Purpose Driven Life} emphasizes its positive, self-esteem-fostering interpretations of sin and temptation to such a degree that, in line with the self-help genre, Warren undermines the concept and value of guilt, a concept that, Warren suggests, “distracts you from your true purpose.”\textsuperscript{115}

Warren has defined sin as “a lack of spiritual maturity,” or as anything “failing to bring God glory.”\textsuperscript{116} What, according to Warren, glorifies God? “Jesus glorified God by fulfilling his purpose in life. We honor God the same way. When anything in creation fulfills its purpose it glorifies God. Even the lowly ant brings glory to God when it fulfills the purpose it was created for. God made ants to be ants and you to be you!”\textsuperscript{117} Sin, therefore, originates in a lack of self-knowledge and failure to live one’s purpose. This seems contrary to the more common evangelical view that sin is transgression against God’s laws. Warren argues that these two definitions are not at odds. When pressed in interviews, Warren has argued that since a person’s purpose is wrapped in God’s plan for their life, which inevitably involves salvation through Christ, following one’s purpose \textit{is} following God’s laws. Yet the book that more than twenty million people have purchased does not make this connection explicit for the readers.

Of the three theological foci examined in chapter 1 (sin, salvation, and scripture), salvation is the most central to the shift Warren is orchestrating. Warren believes that personal salvation comes only through the acceptance of Jesus Christ as one’s personal savior, but publicly skirts the issue and seems uncomfortable discussing the concept of salvation as it is defined by most evangelicals. When asked in interviews about whether or not non-Christians will go to heaven, Warren responds with comments like, “Everyone is betting his life on something…I’m betting mine on the fact that Jesus was what he said he was.”\textsuperscript{118} Perhaps this kind of indirect response is understandable. Due to his celebrity, Warren may simply be attempting to avoid the headline “Warren damns the Muslim world” or the like. However,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{114} Warren, \textit{Life}, 204.
\item \textsuperscript{115} Warren, \textit{Life}, 49.
\item \textsuperscript{116} Warren, \textit{Life}, 206.
\item \textsuperscript{117} Warren, \textit{Life}, 22.
\item \textsuperscript{118} \textit{Charlie Rose}, Public Broadcasting Company, August 15, 2007.
\end{itemize}
Warren also argues that the evangelical community has become myopically focused on personal salvation at the expense of social salvation.

Through *The Purpose Driven Life*, Warren attempts to rebrand evangelical Christianity for a broader market. What concerns his critics is that in attempting to reach so many, he intentionally downplays the fact that the grammar of message is rooted in evangelical Christianity. One could argue that Warren’s rebranding could more accurately be deemed a watering down, such that many of his readers may miss core evangelical theological tenants, or simply interpret them as optional. Warren maintains that the deep structure (or grammar) of his message has never deviated from evangelical theological norms, despite the fact that his lexicon necessarily adapts to the prevailing culture. This is difficult to deny. Although he avoids publicly discussing issues such as sin, salvation, and scripture, he has shown evidence that he is biblical literalist, that he believes in the necessity of the born again experience, and that one is saved through the acceptance of Christ as one’s savior. Yet dramatic changes in lexicon—particularly changes as powerful and as popular as Warren’s—can create the conditions under which changes in grammar can occur. This kind of “slippery slope” is exactly what Warren’s critics fear. Ironically, the cultural adaptability of evangelicalism, which is innate to its cultural grammar, may be precisely what allows Warren to affect (however unintentionally) evangelicalism’s theological grammar. One cannot argue that Warren’s personal theology falls outside the evangelical category, his predominant rhetoric, however, may be creating the conditions for a deep theological, as well as cultural, shift within evangelical Christianity.

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In 2002, Warren became the first high profile evangelical pastor to put the HIV/AIDS pandemic at the top of his church’s priorities. He received considerable praise from media outlets, and AIDS organizations, and from many in the evangelical community, including Billy Graham, for having the courage to address a disease, that because of its ties to non-monogamous sexual behavior and homosexuality, had been virtually ignored by the evangelical community. The praise was actually due to Kay Warren, who first became interested in evangelical responses to HIV/AIDS while on a trip to South Africa. Mrs. Warren shared her desire to direct some of the power of their church community in that direction, and Rick Warren quickly responded. Saddleback began hosting an annual AIDS Summit aimed at directing initiatives and funds to curb the spread of the disease and at helping those affected by the virus. Most important has been
the political pressure Warren has been able to place on policy makers. In 2003, Warren and a
group of other religious leaders pushed the reluctant Bush Administration to design the
President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief. Although the details of Warren’s HIV/AIDS
projects are too extensive to list into here, the results of Saddleback’s AIDS focus are
noteworthy.

As if taking on a pandemic disease wasn’t ambitious enough, the success of the AIDS-
focused projects inspired Warren to articulate a more exhaustive, global humanitarian plan that
he calls the PEACE Plan. The PEACE Plan is a five-part solution for what Warren calls the five
“global giants” or the global plagues at the root of majority of the world’s problems. Warren’s
“Giants” are: pandemic disease, rampant illiteracy, self-serving leadership, extreme poverty, and
spiritual emptiness. PEACE (the solution) stands for: Promote reconciliation, Equip leaders,
Assist the poor, Care for the sick and Educate the next generation. PEACE is essentially an
umbrella organization that sends hundreds of church groups all over the world to accomplish a
myriad of tasks from building hospitals and schools to distributing food and funds to ministerial
work. PEACE is a church-to-church organization rooted in Warren’s idea that the world’s
problems can only be solved by tripartite partnership between governments, private companies,
and churches. Most importantly, PEACE represents Warren’s vision of bringing American
evangelicals out of their domestically focused agendas and into the service of a global
interdenominational Christian movement—the second reformation.

Warren has repeatedly stated that he is “tired of Christians being known for what they’re
against.” Warren’s global focus seems to be part of a broader initiative to officially liberate the
American evangelical community from the now largely unpopular and defunct agendas of the
religious right. Warren doesn’t want to talk about abortion; he wants to talk about poverty. He
doesn’t want to talk about personal morality; he wants to talk about cultural morality. As he put
it to Charlie Rose in 2007, an ever-shrinking world requires a “unifying Christianity.” Warren
isn’t suggesting an end to denominationalism. Indeed he argues, “God likes varieties.” Rather,
Warren is arguing that the evangelical discourse in the United States needs to be reunited with
the mainline denominations and even with that of Catholics, in a common commitment to ending
global social ills.

About 100 years ago, Protestants split. A lot of the mainline churches said, “We need to redeem these social structures, these social institutions. And there isn't a lot of need for personal salvation because people are basically good.” But then the other people, the fundamentalists and the evangelicals said, “No we’re going to focus on Jesus as our savior,” and they focused on personal issues, and family issues and they defined morality in terms of personal morality instead of public morality.

Well, who’s right? Well, they both are, and they need to be brought back together.  

From this we can see a clear departure from the priorities the evangelical community has articulated in the last half-century, issues like gender roles, school prayer, abortion, creationism/intelligent design, homosexuality, and stem cell research. Warren is attempting to lead the discourse toward a more unified, socially directed, and seemingly postmillennial set of priorities.

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For a while Warren’s attempts to pull the American evangelical discourse toward a less divisive and more globally conscious agenda seemed to be succeeding. These initiatives seemed to be garnering him even more popularity, particularly among young evangelicals hungry for an optimistic articulation of their beliefs that did not seem intolerant or passé. The PEACE plan united churches all over the US with churches in the developing world to fight poverty and disease. At the time, the American political climate was more focused on the issues of security and economics than social issues, which validated Warren’s shifting agenda. Warren successfully created new priorities for the portion of the evangelical community sick to death of waging battles over family issues while secular groups focused on issues like climate change and hunger, and seemed perfectly poised to usher in his second reformation, that grand uniting of Christians everywhere to conquer the “global giants.” But then, during the election season of 2008, at the peak of his influence, Warren grew uncertain of his own priorities.

During the 2008 political season, a ballot initiative to ban same-sex marriage was introduced in Warren’s native California, and Warren was dragged back into a culture war he had been working for years to make irrelevant. Warren was reticent to comment. He gave limited interviews and never explicitly campaigned for Proposition 8. Yet, when asked by multiple news organizations, Warren stated, “Every single culture, and every single religion has defined marriage as a man a woman.” Saddleback was the home base for several anti-gay marriage activist groups and Saddleback members, along with many other evangelicals, campaigned heavily for the ban. Gay rights groups and anti-gay rights groups, most of whom were religious in nature, swarmed California. Suddenly, it seemed as if the evangelical community that only a year before seemed hungry for a global focus was silenced by the ideological entrenchments of decades past. The religious right no longer seemed so passé.

Of course, Proposition 8 was not the only newsworthy element of the political season. A historic and protracted presidential race, Democratic Senator Barack Obama and Republican Senator John McCain was coming to a close. Warren’s choices during the 2008 election surprised many. Typically an apolitical figure, Warren decided to host The Faith Forum. Reportedly, Warren contacted the candidates by email and phone and invited them to a joint appearance at Saddleback Church. Warren had offered his church as a venue for candidates to make public addresses earlier in the election season, but the Faith Forum would be a one-on-one sit down with the pastor, answering questions of his choosing. With only a few emails and call, Warren managed to wrangle the candidates into their first joint appearance. Both candidates rearranged their schedules to be at Saddleback.

Most news media concluded that the Faith Forum had little impact on the election and that both candidates did well—although most granted that McCain was better received. Like the majority of Orange County, Warren’s church community is largely Republican. Yet it was a noteworthy evening—not because of what either of the candidates said, but because of what Warren asked them.

This was Warren’s event. He had complete control over the format of the event and the questions asked. At the Faith Forum, Warren asked a few personal questions such as “Who are the three wisest people you know?” and “What has been your greatest moral failing?” He asked a

121 Interview with Ann Curry, NBC Dateline, December 19, 2008.
philosophical question: “Does evil exist?” But surprisingly, Warren fell back on the agenda of the religious right and asked about abortion and stem cell research. Both candidates favored lifting bans on embryonic stem cell research, and neither issue had played a central role in either campaign. Although he controlled the agenda of the evening, Warren did not ask about the initiatives his work has focused on since 2002. Why did he not ask about poverty in Africa? Why did he not ask about AIDS? It was an unexpected retreat into the evangelical political platform of the past.

Were his questions indicating that although Warren claims new priorities, he remains lodged in old ones? Or was it just pandering and if so, why and to whom? Warren has the influence and power to corral presidential candidates, to shape new agendas, and to craft new priorities. Why would he allow his own forum to be mired in the ideological entrenchments of the past? It is possible that Warren doubted the power of his own influence—that while standing in the national spotlight, he fell back on the old platform because he believed that it was what the evangelical community wanted to hear. Alternatively, it is also possible that Warren was attempting to energize the evangelical base with his questions, in order to secure the election for Senator McCain. Warren is a register independent and never campaigned for either candidate; however, it was presumed by the news media at the time that Warren would personally be voting for Senator McCain.

On November 4, Barack Obama won the 2008 presidential election. Soon after, he announced that Rick Warren would give the inaugural invocation. Same-sex marriage advocates and liberal media outlets sharply criticized the choice. The New York Times called the choice “controversial” even though Warren had been previously hailed as “America’s Pastor” by equally-reputable news sources. The Huffington Post released a parody of the prayer Warren was to give, masqueraded as a leaked copy. The parody linked Warren not only with homophobia and sexism, but also with anti-Semitism and Nazism. Warren responded by backpedaling on his support for Proposition 8. “I never once gave an endorsement,” he told Larry King; and on Dateline he insisted, “I am not an anti-gay activist.”

He seems eager to refocus public attention on what he is for rather than what he is against.

123 Larry King Live, CNN, April 7, 2009.
While it isn’t clear what, exactly, led Warren to make such seemingly drastic changes in his agenda—it is clear that Warren seems uncertain of his own purpose in these changing times. In a season where the national dialogue seemed focused on the need for (and ability to make) radical changes, Warren was hesitant, and retreated to issues he previously seemed eager to move beyond. Warren has clearly had a substantial influence on the evangelical community; however he now appears conflicted. The direction in which he will lead his community is, like Warren, uncertain.

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It is evident that Warren’s pull on the evangelical nebula has been significant. In his books, he has rearticulated central evangelical concepts and woven secular self-help terminology into evangelical theology. Through his church, he has led and shaped the megachurch movement, providing it with new marketing tactics and offering it new methods for continued growth. Finally, Warren has attempted to reshape the evangelical political agenda, to rebrand it as globally conscious, inclusive, relevant, and positively-focused. Where he will go from here remains to be seen; however, it appears that his brief retreat into the issues of the past was temporary. Warren has emerged as a leading voice in American evangelicalism for the twenty-first century, and he is determined to map a new course.
Bibliography


