

# The Purpose Driven Church Controversy

Critics of Rick Warren's *The Purpose Driven Church* have raised a range of concerns about its approach to church organization, especially when compared to New Testament patterns. Here's a detailed breakdown of these criticisms and how the model diverges from early Christian ecclesiology.

## 1. Pragmatism vs. Apostolic Pattern

### Criticism:

*The Purpose Driven Church* is often seen as being built on **pragmatic, results-driven strategies**—targeting the felt needs of seekers, using business and marketing principles, and optimizing for numerical growth and member satisfaction.

### Contrast with New Testament:

New Testament churches emphasized **doctrinal fidelity**, spiritual maturity, and **conformity to apostolic teaching**, regardless of numerical outcome (Acts 2:42; 1 Tim 3:15). Critics argue that early church organization focused on **spiritual disciplines**, **shepherding**, and **organic growth**, rather than mass appeal or structured programs.

## 2. Mission Shift: From God-Centered to Man-Centered

### Criticism:

Warren's model is sometimes described as **man-centered**, focusing on fulfilling five human-centric “purposes” (worship, fellowship, discipleship, ministry, evangelism), often framed in terms of **personal fulfillment** or “discovering your purpose.”

### Contrast with New Testament:

Critics argue that the New Testament church was **Christ-centered**, focused on **submission to Christ as Lord**, and on **edification of the body** rather than personal actualization (Eph 4:11-16; Col 1:28). The apostles called believers to deny themselves (Luke 9:23), not to pursue purpose-driven self-expression.

## 3. Role of Leadership and Church Governance

### Criticism:

Warren's model often advocates for a **CEO-style leadership**, where the senior minister functions as a visionary leader with centralized control, supported by staff and purpose-specific teams.

#### **Contrast with New Testament:**

The early church practiced **plurality of elders** (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5), local accountability, and **congregational involvement** in decision-making (Acts 6:2-5). Critics claim the *Purpose Driven* structure can diminish **biblical oversight and mutual accountability**, favoring efficiency over scriptural order.

### **4. Seeker-Sensitive and Market-Oriented Philosophy**

#### **Criticism:**

The *Purpose Driven* model is closely aligned with the “**seeker-sensitive**” movement, crafting worship services and ministries to appeal to the unchurched or culturally disengaged.

#### **Contrast with New Testament:**

New Testament worship was primarily **God-directed**, reverent, and centered on **the Word, prayer, and the Lord’s Supper** (Acts 2:42; 1 Cor 14). Critics argue that the NT church never shaped its gatherings around unbelievers' preferences, but prioritized the **spiritual nourishment and maturity of believers**.

### **5. De-emphasis on Doctrine and Expository Teaching**

#### **Criticism:**

Many critics argue that the *Purpose Driven* approach often downplays **deep doctrinal teaching** in favor of **topical, life-application messages** that appeal to emotion or relevance.

#### **Contrast with New Testament:**

Paul repeatedly instructed elders to **teach sound doctrine** (Titus 2:1), **guard against false teaching** (Acts 20:28-30), and preach the Word “in season and out of season” (2 Tim 4:2). The NT church was catechetical and deeply theological.

6. Programmatic vs. Relational Church Life

Criticism:

Warren's model heavily relies on **structured programs and ministries**, with each member funneled into a system of classes, teams, and campaigns.

Contrast with New Testament:

Early church life was highly **relational**, marked by **house-to-house fellowship**, mutual edification, and shared life (Acts 2:44-47; Rom 12:4-13). Critics suggest that the NT pattern emphasizes **organic discipleship**, not systematized pipelines.

Summary Table

Aspect	Purpose Driven Model	New Testament Model
Leadership	Senior minister-led, CEO model	Plurality of elders and deacons
Emphasis	Programs and growth metrics	Spiritual maturity and faithfulness
Audience Focus	Seeker-sensitive, felt needs	God-centered, edification of saints
Preaching Style	Topical, purpose-driven	Expository, doctrinal
Church Life	Programmatic, campaign-based	Relational, organic
Governance	Staff-led, goal-oriented teams	Congregational involvement and accountability

## Conclusion

While *The Purpose Driven Church* has had substantial influence globally, especially in the Evangelical and megachurch movements, critics from traditional, Reformed, and Restorationist backgrounds frequently argue that its model diverges from the **simplicity, spiritual depth, and apostolic authority** of the New Testament church. These concerns are rooted not just in stylistic preferences but in **theological and ecclesiological convictions** about the nature of the church, its leadership, and its mission.