The Perils of Purpose-Driven Christianity

by Ruben Constante, Jr.



When I first gave my life to the Lord, I asked for one thing more than anything else. I wanted Him to change me from being the ugly person I had become. I was tired of being angry, hateful, and bitter. I wasn't looking for a "purpose" or a "calling."

I wanted to be free from emotional and spiritual bondage.

Discovering who I was created to be as a man, father, husband, leader, etc. came several years later, and it did so because I surrendered my will to the Cross and I submitted to the process of discipleship.

I didn't "claim" Jeremiah 29:11.

The Problem with "Purpose"

Modern Christianity became obsessed with individual purpose seeking perhaps after Rick Warren wrote *The Purpose Driven Life* in 2002. I don't recall Jesus or His apostles or any other author of the Bible exhorting us to "find your purpose," but somehow our American church is infatuated with looking for their special assignment.

When I was incarcerated, it engulfed my surroundings in 2008, when a purpose-type book was introduced into the T.E.A.M. Program, the faith-based program I was part of. The book was called *The Captivity Series: The Key to Your Expected End*, written by Katie Souza, a former inmate. Sadly, it left most men more troubled than it did transformed, because it overly spiritualized Jeremiah 29:11, that famous text everyone uses to claim they have a calling from God.

"For I know the thoughts I have toward you," says the Lord, "thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope."

Some Context

Bottom line: Jeremiah 29:11 is a promise from God to the Jews that He would fulfill the covenant He made with Abraham and David, that His chosen ones would have a land of their own. In fact, He

told Abraham that the Jews would become captives to foreign nations, but that after a set time they would be returned to their homeland (Gen. 15:12-16).

That's the context of Jeremiah 29:11.

Does God have a plan for us? Yes, He does. Does He think peaceful thought of us and not of evil? Of course, He does! Does He have a glorious future awaiting us? Absolutely!

But those promises are to be interpreted through New Covenant teachings, not through Old Testament prophecy.

The problems that have spawned as a result of Christians overly spiritualizing this passage are many, but in this three-part series we will only cover three: 1. It distorts the Gospel; 2. It distracts us from discipleship; and 3. It discourages the heart.

It Distorts the Gospel

So, what is the Gospel? In short, it the good news that God has sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to redeem us from the law of sin and death. It is God sending Jesus to die on our behalf that we might live with Him forever. It's God dying to reconnect with us with Himself. The Gospel is this:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed; to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord."

(Luke 4:18, 19)

But purpose-driven Christians aren't focused on that. It's rare to hear purpose seekers talk about sin, death, consequence, confession, repentance, submission, and accountability. It's not that they don't believe in those things. It's that those features of Christianity aren't a top priority.

Generally, what purpose-seeking Christianity encourages us to do is focus more on what we're gifted with. It misplaces our priorities. Purpose-seekers are too busy looking for what world-changing task they were created to accomplish. They want to know how God can use them for the stage.

In principle, there is nothing wrong with this. It's a good thing that we desire to make a difference and be used by God. But what tends to happen is we forget the actual cost. We begin to seek God primarily for what He can do through us, instead of focusing on the heart issues that need healing.

Purpose-seeking Christianity distorts the Gospel, because it transforms Christianity into an *American Idol* quest. It places a high premium gift-seeking and not enough on repentance. People enchanted with their purpose don't make cross carrying a focal point in their lives.

In fact, many get lost trying to find the will of God for their lives, because they've been duped by purpose-driven theology. Their obsession with finding their purpose blinds them to authentic

discipleship, because discipleship calls them to look closer at the issues that are often suppressed for the sake of being used by God.

This usually places them in compromising positions just to do ministry. In fact, integrity and holy living aren't top priorities to purpose-seekers, because those requirements demand their personal purpose take a backseat to the Lord's glory. And they don't like that.

In short, purpose-driven Christianity is a quest for self-fulfillment, whereas the Gospel is a life of self-denial. Jesus said, "Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me" (Lk. 9:23). The Gospel is centered on following Jesus, not looking for how He can use you. When we reorient ourselves and simply follow Him in all that we do, His "purpose" for our lives will automatically be fulfilled.

The Gospel is about God reaching down from heaven to save that which is lost (Lk. 19:10). After doing that, He uses all of life's troubles to conform us into the image of His Son (Rom. 8:28-30). The Gospel is the death walk of the Cross (Phil. 1:21). It's God dying for us, so that we can reflect His image (2 Cor. 3:18) and glorify Him in all that we do (Col. 3:23).

That is the only purpose worth pursuing.

The Perils of Purpose-Driven Christianity, Part 2

During a phone conversation I had with a brother this morning, we were discussing why the Church isn't more organic and less organizational. Why are churches not investing more time and energy into using the gifted men and women in the Body, as opposed to just doing things as they always have been done?

My answer was simple: Most churches are organizational and not organic because doing ministry that way saves money. Churches are more inclined to conduct business with a bottom line in mind. I mean, sure, we need to exercise wise money management skills in all our affairs, but I'm not sure if Jesus died to create an organizational church.

The Great Commission was never about saving money, but about saving souls. About discipling them.

Enter purpose-driven Christianity.

It Distracts us From Discipleship

Discipleship can be an elusive term. What I've witnessed so far is it seems to confuse the Body of Christ. Personally, I never knew what discipleship was until I got serious about working together with other leaders in my local church at the Torres.

Co-founding the T.E.A.M. Program in 2007 served to draw me closer to the nature of the Church. And that's when I discovered how institutional the Church can be. That's when I learned that what Catholic leaders had done to the Church during the Dark Ages is what some inmate leaders do the Church in prison. I had written *Shackling Jesus: How Christians in Prison Institutionalize God* to address this very thing.

During my time as a leader, Bible teacher, and mentor, I noticed that many men had been overly concerned with finding their purpose. They were enchanted by gifted speakers who would often get behind the pulpit to preach Jeremiah 29:11. Their charisma would often mesmerize the audience, prompting others to be just like them.

Sure, inmates were converting to Christianity, but as I look back and see the fruit of that movement and what has become of many of those men (including myself), I think we missed something. I even think some of those conversions were exercises in shallow sentiment. Many men got sidetracked by an emotion-based Christianity and set their hearts up to receive a romantic version of the faith. Their emotions got the best of them.

The fact is, many things can divert us from the Great Commission, but nothing can draw us further away from living for the Lord then living for ourselves.

And purpose-driven Christianity does that. How, you may ask, does wanting to know our purpose draw us *away* from Christ as opposed to drawing us closer to Him? Simple. When our focus is on what we can do or on what God can do through us, we can easily become obsessed with selfish ambition—even if it that ambition is advancing the kingdom of God.

In Scripture, we will never see any of the great men and women in the Bible actively seeking their purpose. They didn't enlist in a class that taught them how to be used by God. Instead, you'll find each of them just living their lives, doing the normal things that characterize life.

Until God stepped in.

Abraham didn't look for his purpose. Moses didn't seek his calling. Ruth didn't look for her calling. Even the disciples. They didn't seek Jesus. He sought them. (And Paul was on his way to kill more Christians when God called him!) None of those saints were purpose zealots, preaching find-your-purpose sermons and conducting seminars on how to get God to use them. They simply lived life.

God just called them out of their sin.

Part of what's negatively affected the modern Church is America's spirit of independence and social media stardom. Because sin can present itself in harmless ways, the modern Church has convinced itself that God wants us all on the stage. When we seek to live our best life now, we fall for the psychological trap of self-actualization. We think that God wants us to always live a materially abundant life, and the way to maximize that is to find our purpose.

But we've conformed to the world.

Sadly, what falls by the wayside is discipleship. Many Christians don't seek a discipleship relationship, because it exposes the heart. In many ways, discipleship is like spiritual parenting, and because of that, people aren't inclined to seek it out. No one wants to be held accountable. (But they sure want their purpose!)

One of the biggest problems with sidestepping discipleship and focusing on your purpose is that you won't know what to do with it. Imagine a 12-year-old boy inheriting a million dollars from his deceased father. What will that kid do with a million bucks?

The same thing happens to those Christians who "find their purpose" without submitting the process of a discipleship relationship. They will take some quiz that tells them what they are good at, sprinkle it with a few signs of confirmation, and there you have it: a saint ready to do battle with no virtue to back it up.

They forget that callings require character not charisma.

When purpose seeking is all you do and when trying to find God's will is all you're focusing on, you will prematurely jump into ministry and squander your stewardship. You will mistakenly believe that because you are gifted you are granted permission. You will think that because you have the talent you have the tools.

You won't.

You will fall for the pits of popularity. You will fall for the trap of self-indulgence. You might think you're doing God's will because you figured out what you're good at, but you would be like Peter when he was given His calling; you will jump the gun and risk betraying the Lord with your hastiness (cf. Matt. 16:13:23). You won't be mindful of the things of God but of the things of man.

You will be following *your* purpose, not God's.

The Perils of Purpose-Driven Christianity, Part 3

Back in 2014, the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge took the nation by storm. It seemed like everyone was trying to outdo the next person. It seemed kind of interesting and fun at first, but then I noticed a correlation between the Ice Bucket Challenge and certain Christians challenging other believers to get fired up and "get out there" for Jesus. I started seeing how publicly zealous believers were challenging the rest of us to show up and show out. And that if we didn't get riled up like they did, we were denying Christ or were ashamed of proclaiming His name.

Two things stood out:

One, when we use challenges to encourage others to get "fired up" about Jesus, we inadvertently create an opportunity for the opposite to occur. Not everyone is as bold as those who go public with their declarations of faith in Jesus. In biblical terms, not everyone is a prophet. And

when Christians don't perform those challenges or get publicly fired up, discouragement can creep into their minds. Doubt may arise, and their Christianity is indirectly questioned.

Two, when challenges are issued, we subtly create an unbiblical litmus test to determine who's real for the Lord and who's not. We may not mean to test someone's faith in Christ, but the unwanted consequence of not stepping up can be feelings of unworthiness. Of not being good enough. And that's exactly what happens when we overly focus on discovering our purpose.

This final installment of our "purpose" series is the one that perhaps surprises believers more than the rest, because it seeps into the believer's heart without any notice. It can slowly penetrate even the most seasoned saint and rack them with doubt and depression.

In the previous two points, we saw that overly focusing on discovering our purpose can distort the Gospel and distract us from discipleship. It can distort the Gospel by making Christianity a quest for self-fulfillment, and it can distract us from discipleship, because it compels us to maximize opportunities to exercise out gifts and talents without submitting to the process of a discipleship relationship.

This final point will focus on the discouragement that often overcomes believers when they can't find out for what God created them.

It Discourages the Heart

We are all wired for love. And as image bearers who are created for relationship, we have within us an eternal yearning for acceptance as well. This is what drives the rat race of life: We are all trying to fit in, be accepted, and be noticed.

What Satan does with this is create false narratives of love and acceptance. He promotes faulty ideas of fulfillment and success outside of God's will. This is essentially what he lied to Eve about in the Garden when he told her she wouldn't die. His lies caused her to second guess God's plan:

"So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, that is was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable *to make one wise*, she took of its fruit and ate" (Gen. 3:6, emphasis mine).

The Hebrew word for *wise* here has several meanings: "to have success; to have insight, wisdom, understanding; to prosper, successful; the potent capacity to understand and so exercise skill in life, a state caused by proper training and teaching, enhanced by careful observation" (*The Strongest Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*). These meanings all share a common idea. And that idea is what Satan took and twisted. He convinced Eve that she could find success and prosperity outside of God's plan.

He told her she could find purpose without God.

This false narrative is what we can buy into when we spend too much time seeking God's purpose for our lives. Satan knows we are disconnected from God and are looking for connection in all that we do. He knows we are looking for meaning, love, and purpose. So, what he does is promote

the idea that if we look for our purpose hard enough, if we do this without submitting the full counsel of God's Word, we will discover our special place in this world.

The problem is, we won't. Without surrendering ourselves to the Cross and to the process of a discipleship relationship, we won't find our purpose. Sure, we can easily take a survey and see what we're good at, but intimately knowing what God has in store for us will be missed.

And when we miss it, we will become restless. When we fail to truly know God's will for our lives, we will succumb to hopelessness. We will become discouraged. Also, we will begin to measure ourselves against others who appear to be walking out their calling, and we'll become depressed. We will begin to question whether we're even saved!

As we close this series this month, take some time to rethink your view on purpose. It's not that you aren't called or that God doesn't have a special plan for your life. He *has* called you and He *does* have a plan.

However, what this three-part series has attempted to do is warn us of the dangers that may befall us when we focus too much on gifts and talents. We should never look more to the gift then to the Giver of the gift. We should never lose sight of what the Gospel truly is: a lifestyle of selflessness, not the pursuit of self-fulfillment. We should never sidestep submission to the Commission (cf. Matt. 28:28-30).

Let's not transform the plan of God into an ice bucket challenge, trying to see who can outdo who. Instead, let's remain submitted to the holy calling of the Cross.

Let's decease that He may increase.