

# What is a Christian?

Paul Strawn

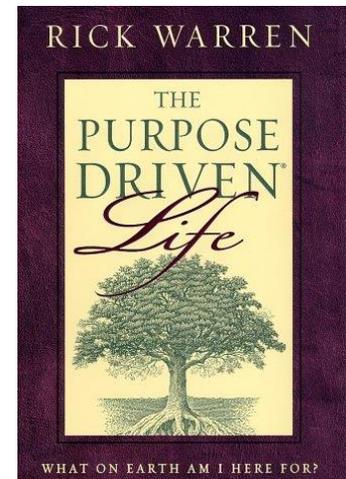
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## Introduction

A few years ago now (2002) a book billing itself as “a blueprint for Christian living in the 21st century” literally swept through the Christian congregations of North America. Entitled *The Purpose Driven<sup>®</sup> Life*,<sup>1</sup> the volume was purchased by over 20,000 congregations of a multitude of denominations, and read communally, following its forty-day format, with the hopes that it would deliver what it promised: The reduction of stress, the focusing of energy, the simplification of decision making, the discovery of the meaning of life, and the proper way to prepare for eternity.<sup>2</sup>

The key? Discovering purpose. According to its author, Southern Baptist minister Rick Warren, if a person can discover God’s purpose for his life, all the promises just mentioned will be fulfilled.

The success of the book—since dubbed the “epicenter of a spiritual shockwave” by ABC News<sup>3</sup>—continues to astound. According to the official *Purpose Driven<sup>®</sup>* website,<sup>4</sup> over 300,000 church leaders in 22 languages have undergone training in basic *Purpose Driven<sup>®</sup>* principles and there is at now at least one congregation in every nation of the world that has taken part. Twenty-five million copies are now in print.



The amazing popularity of the work has thrust Warren onto the world stage. Two years ago Warren was named one of “15 World Leaders Who Mattered Most in 2004” by TIME magazine. Last year, he was named “one of America’s Top 25 Leaders” by U.S. News and World Report<sup>5</sup> and by TIME again as one of “25 Most Influential Evangelicals in America.”<sup>6</sup> Even more surprising, Warren was invited to Rwanda by its President Paul Kagame, to come to “help build a purpose-driven Rwandan church and society.”<sup>7</sup> Warren responded on July 16th, 2005, by launching from the Amahoro National Stadium in Rwanda what he calls “the Global P.E.A.C.E. Plan”<sup>8</sup> a three year effort to mobilize 10,000 people to address the problems affecting billions of people: spiritual darkness, lack of servant leaders around the world, poverty, disease, and

ignorance.

Well, as the old saying goes: “Who can argue with success?” Who am I, who is anyone, to say anything critical of a book, a program, a man, which have obviously inspired millions of people around the world,

<sup>1</sup> Rick Warren, Grand Rapids, Zondervan.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. front flap of book jacket

<sup>3</sup> Jim Douglas, Feb. 27, 2004. See text at: [http://www.saddleback.com/flash/s\\_PDFs/ABCNewsBookatEpicenterofSpiritualShockwave21704.pdf](http://www.saddleback.com/flash/s_PDFs/ABCNewsBookatEpicenterofSpiritualShockwave21704.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.purposedrivenlife.com>

<sup>5</sup> Oct. 31, 2005.

<sup>6</sup> Feb. 7, 2005. See text at: <http://www.time.com/time/covers/1101050207/photoessay/>.

<sup>7</sup> Aug. 22, 2005. See text at: <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1093746,00.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. [http://www.purposedriven.com/en-US/PEACE/PEACE\\_Plan.htm](http://www.purposedriven.com/en-US/PEACE/PEACE_Plan.htm).



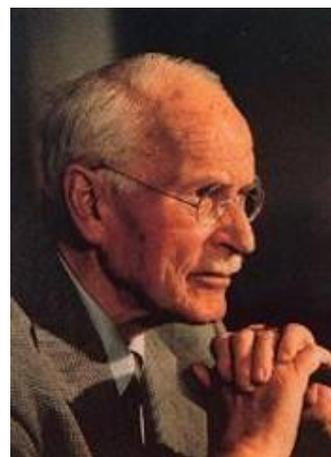
and continue to mobilize Christians to action? Even if there are flaws here and there with being *Purpose Driven*<sup>®</sup>, shouldn't we just "leave well-enough alone?"

I suppose we could. And I have tried. I really have tried. But every time I have read through *The Purpose Driven*<sup>®</sup> *Life* I am struck by the question: Did Jesus Christ, after whom all Christians are named, seek his purpose in order to reduce stress, focus energy, simplify decision making, discover the meaning of life, and prepare for eternity? If he did not, should the Christian life be described as being driven in such a way? More to the point: What is behind such a description of Christianity?

I don't think anyone would deny that the search for purpose as the key to happiness is nothing new nor uniquely Christian. How many self-help guru's have touted a search for life's purpose as a key to happiness? Even modern psychology had its own champion of purpose-seeking in the last student of Sigmund Freud, the founder of analytical psychology, Karl Jung (1875-1961). Now you may have never heard of Karl Jung, but you have, more than likely, encountered some of his ideas. If you, or your children, have ever taken the *Meyers-Briggs Temperament Indicator* (MBTI),<sup>9</sup> or participated in an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting, you have encountered theories and ideas developed by Karl Jung.

Over the last 50 years or so, disciples of Jung (referenced by Warren in *The Purpose Driven*<sup>®</sup> *Church*)\* have created a mini-school of thought dealing with purpose-seeking. A search on the internet will garner a plethora of titles, touting discovering purpose as the key to life. What is Jungian-inspired purpose-seeking in a nutshell? One book reviewer summarized the content of a number of purpose-seeking works in this way:

"To work toward finding purpose in life, one needs, at least tentatively, to accept certain principles: 1. We each are a soul. 2. All of life is purposeful. 3. Our individual life is purposeful. Everyone is born with a specific mission. 4. We can explore our purpose by using various steps and techniques. 5. We can discover our mission in life by examining our talents, strengths, and abilities. 6. Each individual can make a difference in the world."<sup>10</sup>



If you have read *The Purpose Driven*<sup>®</sup> *Life*, these Jungian-inspired principles will sound oddly familiar.

The obvious dependence of Warren's methodology upon Jungian analytical psychology alone should be enough for us to set the book down and leave it in silence. Many websites have already been created which encourage Christians—merely on the basis of Warren's ties to Jungian psychology—to do just that.\* But some would counter that Warren's book is filled with Bible quotations. In fact, "over 1,200 scriptural quotes and references."<sup>11</sup> There must be something to a book that has "over 1,200 scriptural quotes and references"!

Warren's approach to finding purpose does seem a bit novel. Instead of turning the purpose-seeker inward, to the inner self, Warren turns the purpose-seeker outward, to God. Specifically, it is in the Bible that man's five-fold purpose is found: 1. To give God pleasure; 2. To be part of God's family; 3. To become like Christ; 4. To serve God; 5. To tell others about God.\* The official *Purpose Driven*<sup>®</sup> website describes these purposes a bit more winsomely: "To celebrate [God's] presence, cultivate his character, participate in his family, demonstrate his love, and communicate his Word."<sup>12</sup>

Reading through this five-fold statement of life-purpose, the thought immediately occurs: What Christian could be opposed to it? Certainly all of these ideas are to be found in the Bible. Certainly all would be

<sup>9</sup> For a general overview of the MBTI and its origins in the theories of Jung see: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Myers-Briggs\\_Type\\_Indicator](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Myers-Briggs_Type_Indicator).

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.intuitive-connections.net/issue3/missionbook.htm>.

<sup>11</sup> Warren, back flap of cover.

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.purposedrivenlife.com/>.

whole-heartedly accepted by Christians of every denomination—even those who do not take the Bible to be completely and entirely the Word of God.

So what is the problem? The problem is Warren's view of man. Like the teenage boy, who tricks-out his \$300.00 Ford Pinto with thousands of dollars of cosmetic improvements in the hopes of convincing himself and others that it possesses the essential attributes of a Mustang, Warren has, using Jungian psychological principles and hundreds of Bible passages, described sin-laden man as tricked-out with all sorts of superior faculties and abilities in the hopes that that man will convince himself and others that he actually possesses them.



Now don't get me wrong: Rick Warren has certainly done a great service for humanity by pointing out that the best way to live is by doing what God wants us to do. It makes complete sense that Warren would be invited to Rwanda, a country that has been ravaged by lawlessness, to once again, bring the Law of God to the people there. What Rwanda needs is the rule of law in whatever way it can be packaged.

But the problem with being *Purpose Driven*<sup>®</sup> is not that it repackages the Law of God in a new and appealing way. The problem with being *Purpose Driven*<sup>®</sup> is that the program propagates the idea that man can actually **be** *Purpose Driven*<sup>®</sup>, that man actually **has** the faculties, the abilities, the will, to do what God wants him to do, constantly, if only he is reminded of what to do, and he tries hard enough to do it. In short, the problem with *The Purpose Driven*<sup>®</sup> *Life* is that it promotes a false understanding of who a Christian really is.

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So is that it? Is this just a theological squabble? Warren doesn't get man quite right, so the Lutheran pastor from Minnesota is going to take 45 minutes of your time to make sure you know that? No. There is much more at stake here. Such a false understanding of the essence of a Christian can do nothing but eventually lead a Christian to despair, and thus, enslave him in attempt after attempt after attempt to discover and do what God really wants him to do.

So where does Martin Luther (1483-1546) come into this discussion? Why should we be once again reading through the little book you have in your hands, a modern translation of *The Freedom of a Christian*? Well, we should be reading through this book again because it presents a radically different view of a Christian than that contained in the *The Purpose Driven*<sup>®</sup> *Life*. In fact, we should be reading *The Freedom of a Christian* for it contains Luther's response to the theology of Warren's book, and Luther's response is simply this: The Christian life is one that has been set free from being *Purpose Driven*<sup>®</sup>!

How did Warren's theology end up in Luther's time? Why did Luther respond to it? What was Luther's alternative? These are our topics for the next thirty minutes or so.



### Rick Warren-Like Theology in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century

The Rick Warren-like theology Luther addresses with the *Freedom of a Christian* did not actually originate in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. It was common in the theological writings of the period, but its origins are not to be found there. Luther knew this. That is why he didn't bother so much with those writings as much as with the source of the period's Warren-like skewed view of man. That source originated in the 4<sup>th</sup> century...B.C., in the writings of the person who had tutored none other than Alexander the Great (356-323 BC), a guy by the name of Aristotle (384-322 BCE).



Now why would I assert such thing? Why would I equate the writings of Aristotle with the theology of Rick Warren? Well, Aristotle was the person who pioneered walking around in front of his students while he was lecturing, much like Warren walks around in front of his congregation while preaching...I am joking. That is not why I equate the writings of Aristotle with the theology of Rick Warren (although Aristotle is indeed given credit for pioneering the “walk-about” teaching method!). I equate the writings of Aristotle with the theology of Rick Warren for they had similar ideas of man’s abilities to do what God wants him to do.

According to both, God is the Good Creator of all that exists. According to both, man is the pinnacle of God’s creation. According to both, since man was created by God, man has the innate ability to live like God wants him to live.

According to both, all that man needs to do is learn what God wants him to do.

And then do it. The result? Well-being. Why? By imitating God man functions as he was created to function.

Now this progression of thought is not rocket science is it? It is almost common sense. In fact, for Aristotle, it was common sense. It was not an idea revealed to him by the Old Testament. Aristotle simply deduced it by observing the world around him.

But we all make this same deduction, don’t we? In fact, it is the foundation of our educational system. It is the way we train athletes, musicians, artists, engineers, writers, doctors, etc. If there is a way we want to be, and we believe that by being that way, we will feel better about ourselves in some way, we find someone who is that way, and copy that person.

An example? I can safely say that I am a human being just like Tiger Woods. Tiger Woods, by any measure, is a successful golfer. His success on the golf course has brought him fame, wealth, and I suppose, happiness. If I want such happiness, all that I need to do is to achieve the success of Tiger Woods. To have his success, all that I need to do is copy everything he does on the golf course. The more I would copy him, the more successful I would be, and thus, the happier I would be. (Of course you might counter with: “You can swing that golf club until the cows come home but you will never be like Tiger,” but that is beside the point. Or is it?)



By his observations of the world around him, Aristotle postulated that the greatest good that there is, is God. Since we were created by God, would it not simply be logically, that the best way to live, would be the way our Creator wanted us to live? Our lives, therefore, should be spent trying to learn and then copy what God wants us to do in our thoughts and words and actions.

This common-sense idea of how man relates to God is, I postulate, a great part of Warren’s success. Warren has encapsulated this common sense idea, applied it to man’s relation to God, and distilled it into an easy to read book. What is more, Warren has packaged the idea in a format culturally popular and understandable in the United States today.

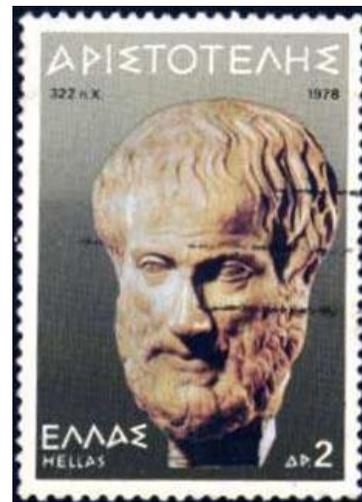
Allow me to digress here for a moment. This is what Warren has done, isn’t it? Has he not, with *The Purpose Driven<sup>®</sup> Life*, simply distilled the popular suburban religious culture of white collar workers in the United States into an easily digestible format? Hasn’t Warren just taken a little bit of popular theology (you are basically a good person), mixed it together with popular management instructional method (here are five ways to be the even better person God wants you to be), packaged it in a digestible form (40 days), and promised great results (the reduction of stress, the focusing of energy, the simplification of decision making, the discovery of the meaning of life, and the proper way to prepare for eternity)? Could we think of a better method to energize college educated, corporate-employed, A-type personalities, who spend their careers successfully

completing project after project after project making lists of objectives, establishing timelines, and defining measurable outcomes, than to give them five religious purposes to accomplish in 40 days?<sup>13</sup>

Back to the topic at hand. As Rick Warren has taken a common-sense idea about how man relates to God, and encapsulated it in a format readily understood in suburban America today, so too had the writings of Aristotle taken this same common-sense idea, and developed it in a format understood by the mover's and shakers of Luther's day, the university faculties.

Of course in Luther's day, Aristotle had to do more than produce a clearly discernable outcome in 40 days. In order for this basic assumption of how man relates to God to be accepted in 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe, it had to be explained in way that related it to every facet of life. You see, back then the idea floated about that there was a uniform way of understanding all that exists. Here we are not only talking about created things, the natural sciences, but we are also talking about the way people relate to each other (the social sciences), and the way we think and talk about things (logic). Well, Aristotle did that.

How had Aristotle become so important? Just like Warren, Aristotle had become a major player in 16<sup>th</sup> century culture through books—not only his own books, but the writings of Medieval theologians who weaved his knowledge and logic into their own works. Aristotle's output was vast and I include a list of his works here just to demonstrate how they seemed to encompass all that there is to know:



**Logical writings:**     *Categories;*  
                              *On Interpretation*  
                              *Prior Analytics*  
                              *Posterior Analytics*  
                              *Topics*  
                              *On Sophistical Refutations*

**Physical and scientific writings:**  
                              *Physics*  
                              *On the Heavens*  
                              *On Generation and Corruption*  
                              *Meteorology*  
                              *On the Cosmos*  
                              *On the Soul*  
                              *On Sense and the Sensible*  
                              *On Memory and Reminiscence*  
                              *On Sleep and Sleeplessness*  
                              *On Dreams*

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<sup>13</sup> (The fact that goal-accomplishing has become part of popular culture is evidenced by the (Missouri) synod's recently published *Report by the Blue Ribbon Task Force for Funding the Mission* ([http://70.103.140.123:2095/horde/services/go.php?url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.lcms.org%2Fgraphics%2Fassets%2Fmedia%2FOffice%2520of%2520the%2520President%2FBlue\\_Ribbon\\_Task\\_Force\\_for\\_Funding\\_the%2520\\_Mission\\_Report.pdf](http://70.103.140.123:2095/horde/services/go.php?url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.lcms.org%2Fgraphics%2Fassets%2Fmedia%2FOffice%2520of%2520the%2520President%2FBlue_Ribbon_Task_Force_for_Funding_the%2520_Mission_Report.pdf).) There you will find that one of the solutions to overcoming doctrinal differences within the synod is for all to adopt a common purpose. The thinking: If we all try to accomplish something together, we will get so wrapped up in getting it done, that our doctrinal differences will be forgotten: "At the congregational level we have seen it happen over and over again. When a congregation has in front of it a major project that nearly everyone agrees is important, it's amazing how petty squabbles within the congregation disappear. The importance of everyone pulling together is contagious..." (p. 13). This may in fact be true. But where, in the Word of God, is taking on a project to accomplish described as the way to achieve unity among fellow brothers and sisters in Christ?)

*On Propheying by Dreams*  
*On Longevity and Shortness of Life*  
*On Youth and Old Age*  
*On Breathing*  
*On Breath*  
*History of Animals*  
*On the Parts of Animals*  
*On the Gait of Animals*  
*On the Progression of Animals*  
*On the Generation of Animals*  
*On Colors*  
*Physiognomics*  
*On Plants*  
*On Marvellous Things Heard*  
*Mechanical Problems*  
*Problems*  
*On Indivisible Lines*  
*Situations and Names of Winds*  
*On Melissus*  
*Xenophanes and Gorgias*

**Metaphysical writings:**

*Metaphysics*

**Ethical writings:**

*Nicomachean Ethics*  
*Great Ethics*  
*Eudemian Ethics*  
*Virtues and Vices*  
*Politics*  
*Economics*

**Aesthetic writings:**

*Rhetoric*  
*Rhetoric to Alexander*  
*Poetics.*

The works of Aristotle had become a dominant cultural force in 16<sup>th</sup> century for a number of reasons which we cannot go into here. Probably the most important event, however, that contributed to the rise to dominance of Aristotle at that time had been an event in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. In the 1255, at the University of Paris, the faculty of arts unveiled a new syllabus in which the study of all known works<sup>14</sup> of Aristotle was required.<sup>15</sup> Other universities eventually followed suit. So some 250 years later (1501), when the 17-year-old Luther pursued his Bachelor of Arts degree at the University of Erfurt, his three semesters of coursework looked like this:

**Grammar:**

Lesser "Priscian"  
 The second part of Aristotle's *Rhetoric for Alexander*

**Logic:**

13<sup>th</sup> century *Compendium* of Peter of Spain (partially based upon Aristotle's works on logic);  
 Commentary on Aristotle by the Neoplatonist Porphyry; Aristotle's *Prior Analytics* and *Posterior Analytics*

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<sup>14</sup> Up until the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the only works of Aristotle generally known were the *Categories* and *On Interpretation*.

<sup>15</sup> Diogenes Allen, *Philosophy for Understanding Theology* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985), p. 108.

“and his writings that dealt with fallacies”

**Natural Philosophy:** Aristotle’s works on physics, psychology and astronomy

**Rhetoric:** The *Laborinthus* of Eberhard of Bethune.

Having received his BA in September of 1502, Luther immediately began working on his Master of Arts degree, the coursework of which looked like this:

**Logic:** Aristotle’s *Topics*

**Natural Philosophy:** Aristotle’s *On the Heavens*

*On Generations and Corruption*

*Meteorology*

*On the Soul*

*On Memory and Reminiscence*

*On Sleep and Sleeplessness*

*On Dreams*

*On Propheying by Dreams*

*On Longevity and Shortness of Life*

*On Youth and Old Age*

*On Breathing*

*On Life and Death*

*Metaphysics* (6 months)

*Nicomachean Ethics* (8 months)

*Politics* (6 months)

*Economics* (1 month)

**Mathematics** Euclid

**Arithmetic**

**Astronomy**

**Music**

Needless to say, when the 21 year old Luther received his MA in January of 1505 he was fully versed in Aristotle. In May of that same year he began law school at the University of Erfurt while at the same time, lecturing on Aristotle. Even after the famous lightening incident on July 2<sup>nd</sup>, and his entering the Augustinian monastery in Erfurt on July 17<sup>th</sup>, Luther’s interaction with Aristotle continued. Even as he began his study of theology, Luther continued to lecture on Aristotle. In the Fall of 1508, Luther was transferred to Wittenberg to fill in for a lecturer in philosophy and lectured four times a week during the winter semester on Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*.

Luther lectured four times a week during the winter semester on Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*.

Why does any of this matter? Well, being steeped in Aristotle, Luther became acutely aware of the Aristotelian world view. For our purposes, this definition of the way Aristotle saw the matter at hand is helpful: “Aristotle believed that the good for humans would be the maximum realization of the function that was unique to humans. Since reason was understood by Aristotle to be the unique quality that humans possessed, it followed that the good for humans was to reason well. Since part of the task of reason was to teach human beings how to act virtuously, the good for humans was the exercise of their faculties in accordance with virtue. *The good life, then, was defined by Aristotle as the activity of the soul in accordance with virtue*” [emphasis mine].<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Susan Haslip, “Aristotle’s Theory of the Good Life: A Consideration of the Role of Luck in the Good Life and the Concept of Self-Sufficiency,” *Quodlibet: Online Journal of Christian Theology and Philosophy*, Vol. 5, Nr. 1, January 2003, <http://www.Quodlibet.net>.

Sound familiar? Substitute “purpose” here for “virtue.”

Linking Aristotle and Warren in this way might seem a bit far-fetched. It is not. Both teach that man is created by God. Both teach that for man to be happy, he must be like God wants him to be. Both teach that for man to be like God wants him to be, man must first learn how God wants him to be and then, through reflection, and the development of good habits, simply be how God wants him to be. The more man becomes like God through reflection and habit, the happier man will be.

### How did Luther Respond to Aristotle?

The question for Luther, the question still for us: Can man do it? Can man simply be told *how* to live like God wants him to live, and then simply *choose* to do so? Aristotle obviously believed that it was possible. Yes, we could argue about how Aristotle believed reason to regulate the soul of man, but at the end of the day, he believed that such a thing was possible and should be pursued.

Now at this point, those of you who have read Warren should put forth the objection: “Warren is different than Aristotle in that Warren teaches that a Christian can do the things that God wants him to do, because a) the Christian has made a choice to live for Him; b) God has chosen to the Christian to have a relationship with Jesus; c) The Christian has received Jesus as his Lord and Savior; d) the Christian has received the power of the Holy Spirit to fulfill his life’s purpose.”<sup>17</sup>

Now certainly we can point out that words like “choose” and “choice” are troubling. But if we want to put the best construction on these ideas, I suppose we could, as many Lutheran congregations supposedly have done. But what then follows in *The Purpose Driven® Life* is down right troubling: The “5 purposes” actually turn out to be 92 imperatives!

What do I mean? Consider how just the first purpose unfolds. In order to “Give pleasure to God,” the purpose driven Christian must:

1. Love God supremely
2. Trust God completely
3. Obey God wholeheartedly
4. Praise and thank God continually
5. Use his abilities
6. Offer himself to God
7. Admit his limitations
8. Become God’s best friend
9. Be honest with God
10. Choose to obey God
11. Choose to value what God values
12. Desire friendship with God more than anything else
13. Worship God accurately
14. Worship God authentically
15. Worship God thoughtfully
16. Worship God practically
17. Tell God how he feels
18. Focus on who God is
19. Trust God to keep His promises

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<sup>17</sup> For Warren, “40 Days of Purpose” begin with this contract, I mean, covenant, in which the reader chooses to participate: “With God’s help, I commit the next 40 days of my life to discovering God’s purpose for my life” (p. 13). Well into the book, page 58, the reader is told straight out: “God will give you what you need if you will just make the choice to live for him.” What follows is a bit of Gospel: “Believe God has chosen you to have a relationship with Jesus, who died on the cross for you. Believe that no matter what you’ve done, God wants to forgive you. ...Receive Jesus into your life as your Lord and Savior. Receive his forgiveness for your sins. Receive his Spirit, who will give you the power to fulfill your life purpose...”

20. Remember what God has done for him.<sup>18</sup>

It is not that any of these imperatives are bad, or wrong, or terrible. What is bad, and wrong and terrible is the idea that a human being can somehow do all of these things, constantly, and whole-heartedly, along with 72 other things, constantly, and whole-heartedly, and that our standing before God is dependant upon our ability to do so.

The belief that such a thing is possible can lead only to despair. Example? A new member of our congregation,<sup>19</sup> a young women in her twenties, attended her parents congregation on a Sunday upon which one section of *The Purpose Driven*<sup>®</sup> *Life* was explained. She left church that morning, so she said, feeling wonderful, feeling like she could really go out and accomplish the list of things that week that the *Purpose Driven*<sup>®</sup> pastor had given her to do, feeling like these things God wanted her to do were within her grasp. As the week wore on, however, she got caught up in the details of the everyday, and forgot about the list. Remembering it on Friday afternoon, and how she felt on Sunday morning after church, she despaired: She had failed. She had not done what she had committed herself to do the Sunday before.

Now you are all probably familiar with Luther's strugglings and strivings as he tried to find a gracious God. Up until now, you may have not been aware of the role Luther's emersion in the writings of Aristotle was probably a catalyst in the strugglings and strivings. It is not as if Luther, in his strugglings and strivings, was trying to follow the teachings of Aristotle per se. Aristotle's basic assumption that we can be like God if we try to be like God was hidden under the popularized phrase of a later theologian steeped in Aristotelian ethics: "Do what is within you!"\* In following this widely understood doctrine of the church of his time, however, Luther was coming face to face with Aristotle's world view, and especially, Aristotle's view of man.<sup>20</sup>

As Luther began his new position as professor of theology in Wittenberg in 1513, Luther was able to dive deeply into a source that presented him with a different view of man than that of Aristotle and the theologians whom synthesized his writings. That source? The Bible.

Realize how earth-shattering this opportunity was for him. Up until the age of 18, the only exposure Luther had to the Bible was through the texts read in church on Sunday morning. His BA and MA had been in the writings of Aristotle. His study of theology had been based on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard (1095-1160). It was first in Wittenberg, at the age of 28, that Luther was finally able to devote himself to intensive study of the Bible.

Not surprisingly, what he found there is something different than what he found in Aristotle's writings. In his first lectures, on the Psalms, the difference doesn't seem so marked. In fact, Aristotle is treated

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid. pp. 66-113.

<sup>19</sup> I have received her permission to relate this story.

<sup>20</sup> An even greater question, which still is a point of contention within the Roman Catholic church, is whether Aristotle, and his adaptation by Thomas Aquinas (1225-1275), put Aquinas in continuity with Augustine of Hippo (354-430), or in contention with him. Ronald Frost, Prof. Of Historical Theology at Multnomah Biblical Seminary in Portland describes the situation this way: "Luther's challenge was more profound than many of his peers realized at first. The two systems were at complete odds with each other. In Augustine's model of the human will, the affective component is primary, so that the love of God is the motivating feature of salvation-God draws the elect to himself apart from any initiative on their part towards God. This was a thoroughly unilateral model of salvation. In the Aristotle/Aquinas model, by contrast, the will is self-moved. That is, the will works most effectively apart from any influence of the affection. In adopting this model, Aquinas assumed that the self-moved will is a necessary feature of salvation which, in turn, led him to adopt a cooperative doctrine of salvation-a doctrine that Luther rejected. The was the "hinge" of Luther's reformation activism." *Aristotle's Ethics: The Real Reason for Luther's Reformation?* Trinity Journal, Fall 1997, available at: [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_qa3803/is\\_199710/ai\\_n8776993](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3803/is_199710/ai_n8776993).

respectfully. It is first in his treatment of Psalm 69:3 (“...My eyes grow dim with waiting for my God”), that we can first notice a subtle dissatisfaction with Aristotle’s place in the realm of the church:

“Allegorically, the eyes of Christ are the studious and contemplative people in the church, those who meditate in the Law of the Lord day and night, those who guide others, especially the bishops, who ought to lead a life committed to both. But in comparison with the vast number of the greedy, the luxurious, and the proud, there is an appalling decrease in the number of such people, and they have surely failed. Some are devoted to gain, some to pleasures, some to ambition, many even to the laws and traditions of men, *and not a few to the philosophy of Aristotle* [emphasis mine]. Because all of these are deserting the study of the divine Word, the eyes of Christ are failing in the church.”<sup>21</sup>

Luther becomes a bit more crass in his treatment of Aristotle with his commentary on Psalm 78:45 (“...and frogs, which destroyed him”), equating Aristotle’s writings with a stagnant swamp: “And just as the frog stays in swamps, so these people linger in writings that are stagnant and not living, that is, in their Talmuds, and our people in the pools of Aristotle, and the heretics in their authors.”<sup>22</sup>

**That outward civil righteousness is the righteousness of Aristotle and**

In Luther’s initial lectures on Romans (1515), the only direct reference to Aristotle is a bit of chiding in his notes on Romans 11:33 (“how unsearchable are his judgements”), as he jotted down that Aristotle sought God in God’s actions where He truly was unsearchable.<sup>23</sup>

It is first in 1516, as far as I can tell, in his lectures on Galatians, that Luther really takes definite issue with Aristotle, and flat-out calls a spade a spade. In his comments on Galatians 2:16 (“yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the Law, but through faith in Jesus Christ,”) Luther distinguishes between an outward, civil righteousness, that avails before men, and an inner righteousness, that avails before God, which is by grace through faith. That outward civil righteousness is the righteousness of Aristotle and Moses:

“In the first place, there is the external way, by works, on the basis of one’s own strength. Of such a nature are human righteousnesses which are acquired by practice (as it is said) and by habit. This is the king of righteousness Aristotle and other philosophers describe—the kind produced by laws of the state and of the church in ceremonies, the kind produced at the behest of reason and by prudence. For they think that one becomes righteous by doing righteous things, temperate by doing temperate things, and the like. This is the kind of righteousness the Law of Moses, even the Decalog itself, also brings about, namely, when one serves God out of fear of punishment or because of the promise of a reward, does not swear by God’s name, honors one’s parents, does not kill, does not steal, does not commit adultery, etc. This is a servile righteousness; it is mercenary, feigned, specious, external, temporal, worldly, human. It profits nothing for the glory to come but receives in this life its reward, glory, riches, honor, power, friendship, well-being, or at least peace and quiet, and fewer evils than do those who act otherwise.”<sup>24</sup>

How this type of righteousness was abused in his day, how it related to the theology and practice of the Church, Luther summarizes bluntly a little later in his comments on Galatians 5:2 (“If you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you.”):

“We learn these godless kinds of righteousness from the decrees of men and from the monstrous theology which has Aristotle as its head and Christ as its feet, since these decrees and these kinds of righteousness alone hold sway. For this is how they vaunt their petty works of satisfaction; and it is amazing what value they place on these with their traffic in indulgences, as if it were not enough to believe in Christ, in whom our righteousness, redemption, satisfaction, life, and glory are by faith alone (1 Cor. 1:30).”<sup>25</sup>

<sup>21</sup> *Luther’s Works*, ed. by Harold J. Grimm (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957), Vol. 10, p. 359. Hereafter *LW*.

<sup>22</sup> *LW* 11, p. 75.

<sup>23</sup> *LW* 25, p. 103.

<sup>24</sup> *LW* 27, p. 219.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, p. 328.

The last of Luther's lecture on Galatians was held on March 13, 1517. It is about at this time that Luther began to work on his own commentary on Aristotle's *Physics* in order to "dethrone...the god of the scholastics."<sup>26</sup> Unfortunately, this commentary does not exist. Merely reference to it, however, is of great value to us to understand Luther's mindset at the time.

Luther's critique of Aristotle continued in the first public disputation for which Luther was responsible as a Doctor of Theology. Known as his *Disputation Against Scholastic Theology*,<sup>27</sup> the 97 theses Luther drafted for discussion probably grew out of that commentary on Aristotle's *Physics*. The disputation was held in Wittenberg, roughly two months before the nailing of the more famous *95 Theses*, on September 4, 1517, and the individual theses are quite telling:

"5. It is false to state that man's inclination is free to choose between either of two opposites.

Indeed, the inclination is not free but captive. This is said in opposition to common opinion.

6. It is false to state that the will can by nature conform to correct precept.

10. One must concede that the will is not free to strive toward whatever is declared good.

26. An act of friendship is not the most perfect means of accomplishing that which is in one. Nor is it the most perfect means for obtaining the grace of God or turning toward and approaching God.

41. Virtually the entire *Ethics* of Aristotle is the worst enemy of grace.

42. It is an error to maintain that Aristotle's statement concerning happiness does not contradict Catholic doctrine.

43. It is an error to say that no man can become a theologian without Aristotle.

44. Indeed, no one can become a theologian unless he becomes one without Aristotle;

50. Briefly, the whole Aristotle is to theology as darkness is to light."

Luther's critique of Aristotle continued unabated after the posting of the *95 Theses* in his *Explanations of the 95 Theses* (1518). There Aristotle is described as the "theologian of glory", who attempts to approach God through God's glory, His creation in general, and not through how He wants to be known, the cross of Jesus Christ:

"[He] does not recognize along with the Apostle, the crucified and hidden God alone [I Cor. 2:2]. He sees and speaks of God's glorious manifestation among the heathen, how his invisible nature can be known from the things which are visible and how he is present and powerful in all things everywhere."<sup>28</sup>

It is not surprising then that in *To the Christian Nobility* (1520) Luther recommended finally that the universities be completely gutted of Aristotle except for his works *Logic*, *Rhetoric* and *Poetics*:<sup>29</sup>

For our purposes, the heart of the matter, the relation of Aristotle to Warren, to the book you have in your hands, is summarized nicely for us in Luther's *Judgement on Monastic Vows* which appeared a year after *Freedom of a Christian*. There he gets to the what's at stake: Would Christians be enslaved by Aristotle's teaching, or be freed by the Gospel?

We learn these godless  
kinds of righteousness  
from the decrees of men  
and from the monstrous  
theology which has  
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Christ as its feet

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Luther's letter to John Lang, February 8<sup>th</sup>, 1517, *LW* 48, p. 38: "I am working on short notes on the *First Book of Physics* with which I am determined to enact the story of Aristaeus against this, my Protheus. He is the most subtle seducer of gifted people, so that if Aristotle had not been flesh, I would not hesitate to claim that he was really a devil. Part of my cross, indeed its heaviest portion, is that I have to see friars born with the highest gifts for fine studies spending their lives and wasting their energies in such play-acting; in addition universities do not cease burning and condemning good books but produce, or rather dream up, bad ones." See also his letters to George Spalatin on February 22 (*ibid.*, pp. 56-59) and March 13<sup>th</sup>, 1519 (*ibid.*, pp. 111-115).

<sup>27</sup> *LW* 31, pp. 9-16.

<sup>28</sup> *LW* 31, p. 227.

<sup>29</sup> *LW* 44, pp. 200-202.

“Christian or evangelical freedom, then is a freedom of conscience which liberates the conscience from works. Not that no works are done, but no faith is put in them. For conscience is not the power to do works, but to judge them. *The proper work of conscience (as Paul says in Romans 2 [:15]), is to accuse or excuse, to make guilty or guiltless, uncertain or certain. Its purpose is not to do, but to pass judgment on what has been done and what should be done, and this judgment makes us stand accused or saved in God’s sight. Christ has freed this conscience from works through the gospel and teaches this conscience not to trust in works, but to rely only on his mercy. And so, the conscience of a man of faith depends solely and entirely on the works of Christ...It is this knowledge of freedom and this health of conscience that is assailed by every device of human and ungodly doctrines* [emphasis mine]. It is here that the craftiness of the serpent seeks to corrupt the simplicity which is in Christ. Here you see how ungodly are the laws about satisfactions by which we are taught to wipe out our sins by our own works. These are the jaws of ravening wolves, which tear consciences from Christ and, when they are torn away, pitifully cast the consciences on the resources of their own works...Here you see the entire canon law as well as the dominion of the pope condemned as being against Christ, because they do nothing else but ensnare consciences in their own works and take them away from Christ, after having first destroyed their freedom as well as any teaching or knowledge of freedom. But in particular it is the Parisian school that is condemned in this connection, the impure and foul whore which has declared that Aristotle’s teachings on morals are not in conflict with the teachings of Christ, since he teaches nothing other than that virtue is acquired by works, saying, “By doing good we become good.” The Christian conscience curses this statement as bilge water of hell and says, “By believing in a Christ who is good, I, even I, am made good: his goodness is mine also, for it is a gift from him and is not my work.””

## Luther’s Alternative

So what is in *The Freedom of the Christian*? Luther’s *The Freedom of a Christian* contains Luther’s response to, his final rejection of, Aristotle’s understanding of man; the idea that man has the ability to be *Purpose Driven*<sup>®</sup>, or simply to “become good by being good.” In *The Freedom of the Christian* Luther does not begin with the common sense idea that since God made man, man must have the ability to be what God wants man to be. Instead Luther simply describes man as the Word of God describes man. Years later (1536), in a disputation dealing simply with who man actually is, Luther would justify this approach by stating: “Philosophers and Aristotle are not able to understand or to define what the theological man is, but by the grace of God we are able to do it, because we have the Bible.”<sup>30</sup> As amazing as it now may seem, by relying on the Word of God for his description of man, Luther forged a radically new understanding of the Christian.

According to the Bible, the Christian is not simply a single entity with a will that can chose between good and evil. In fact, the Christian is two entities in one person: An Old Adam and a New Man. The Christian is not one or the other, or first one and then the other, or decides to be one or the other, but at one and the same time, until he dies, the Christian is both Old Adam and New Man, he is both flesh and Spirit.

Where did Luther get this model? Some might be quick to suggest the Council of Chalcedon (A.D. 451), and the Christological two nature model pounded out there. This model you learned in confirmation: Christ is one person of two natures, the divine and human. But just as the Council of Chalcedon did not simply dream up such a model, but deduced this model from the Word of God, so Luther in *The Freedom of the Christian* based his description of the Christian on the Word of God.

At the outset of *The Freedom of the Christian* Luther asserts the existence of this two-fold nature of the Christian on the basis of 2 Corinthians 4:16: “Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day,” and Galatians 5:17: “The flesh wars against the spirit and the spirit wars against

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<sup>30</sup> *The Disputation Concerning Man*, LW 34, p. 142.

the flesh.” But Luther’s purpose here is not to somehow philosophically construct the Christian so that we could then talk about him in some esoteric manner.

Rather, he points out this reality of the Christian to inform us as to how we should view our day to day lives as Christians (thus the somewhat tongue-in-cheek title of the edition you have in your hands: *How to Live a Christian Life*). Just as the reality of the two natures of Christ had definite implications for our Savior’s interaction with man on earth (He was both free and enslaved as He was both in the form of God and the form of a servant, both the Lord of all and under the law) so too does the two-fold nature of the Christian have definite implications for our interaction with our neighbor.

Those implications? Through faith in Christ are subject to none; through love we are subject to all. Luther put it this way: “A Christian is the most liberated master of everyone, and subject to no one. A Christian is the most dutiful servant of everyone, and subject to everyone.”

But what does that actually mean? It means first of all, that through faith in Christ, we are free from serving our neighbor in order to avoid hell and gain heaven. Simply put, through faith we are not *driven purposely* by the fear that we must do acts of love to gain eternal life. The implication of this reality for our consciences should not be underestimated!<sup>31</sup> It also means that since we have gained heaven through faith in Christ, we are in need of nothing, and thus can serve or neighbor in love. Simply put: We do not have to spend our waking hours, worrying about our eternal salvation and working toward that end to the point that we have no time to serve those around us in love. Our Salvation in Christ thus frees us to love those around us!

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<sup>31</sup> Troubling then this passage from Warren: “At the end of your life on earth you will be evaluated and rewarded according to how well you handled what God entrusted to you. That means everything you do, even simply daily chores, has eternal implications.” Warren, p. 45.