

LifeWay, Rick Warren, and the Son of God

Dr. Randy White

LifeWay Christian Resources of the Southern Baptist Convention and Southern Baptist Pastor Rick Warren have teamed up with the New Age Catholics Mark Burnett and Roma Downey to produce “Son of God: The Life of Jesus in You.” This is a six-session “Bible study” for small groups. As a Southern Baptist who is concerned about the direction of the Southern Baptist Convention and LifeWay (wholly owned and controlled by the SBC), I want to write an in-depth critique of this resource.

First, let me share an underlying concern with small group “Bible study” as it is most often seen today. Can we really call it Bible study when a participant would not have to bring a Bible? The Scriptures used are printed in the student’s book, devoid of context and often used out of context (as you will soon see). The contemporary small-group is a study of a celebrity pastor or teacher’s work. Only by a wild stretch of the imagination could the participant leave the session saying they had engaged in Bible study. The small-group Bible study is the equivalent of medical school students playing a game of Operation or engineers building a bridge using Legos. In years past, the church had small groups that would meet and study Christian authors, but it was called it a book circle. Bible study was when people brought their Bible and studied the Bible for content. This kind of study is almost non-existent in the purpose-driven, growth-oriented church. Rather, the “Discipleship Pastor” will scurry from one publisher to another looking for the coolest six-week topical study to throw to their small-group leaders, whose function is to push play on the DVD and ask the pre-arranged questions. (Need proof? Look at page 4, shown below, which contains “A Note to Small-Group Hosts.”):

A NOTE TO SMALL-GROUP HOSTS

This video-based study is designed to be used with a small group of friends at home, at work, or at a church. If you're not already in a small group, start one of your own! It's easy.

How to Start a Small Group

You don't have to be a teacher. You don't need any formal training. You don't even need any experience in a small group. Just keep these four things in mind, and you'll succeed as a small-group H.O.S.T.:

Have a heart for people.

Open your home to a group of friends who want to study with you.

Serve them a snack.

Turn on the video. The six video sessions by Rick Warren provide the teaching for each session of study.

If you can do those four things, you can host a small group of your own. All of the material and instructions you need are provided in this study guide. There's no experience necessary, so enjoy the journey!

The study guide material is meant to be your servant, not your master. So please don't feel pressured to discuss every question in every session. Feel free to select the questions that seem right for your group. The point is not to race through the sessions; the point is to take time to let God work in your lives. Nor is it necessary to "go around the circle" before you move on to the next question. Give people the freedom to speak, but don't insist on it. Your group will enjoy deeper, more open sharing and discussion if people don't feel pressured to speak up.

For more information and advice on hosting a small group, see the Helps for Hosts section on page 53-55.

Personally, I simply don't have time nor interest in such shallow "discipleship." No wonder the average church member (and probably the above-average church member) couldn't pass a basic Bible-knowledge quiz.

The subtitle of the series, *The Life of Jesus in You*, foretells the basic premise of the study: YOU. The resource takes the baptism, temptation, suffering, death, resurrection, and ministry as a springboard to talk about YOU. Once again, the narcissism of the church-growth movement displays its ugly head.

Bible Translation

My first issue is the use of the Biblical translations. There are ten translations shown in the copyright page—

- New International Version – NIV 2011
- New Living Translation – NLT 2005
- New King James Version – NKJV 1982
- The Contemporary English Version – CEV 1995
- The Living Bible – TLB 1971
- Today's English Version – TEV 1976
- God's Word – GW 1995
- The Message – MSG 2002
- The Amplified Bible – AMP 1965
- The New Jerusalem Bible – NJB – 1990

Any pastor, author, or book publisher who uses 10 versions of the Bible in his sermon, book, or resource is seeking a rendering of the Word that fits his agenda. There is simply no legitimate reason to use 10 versions of Scripture in honest Bible study. Furthermore, the versions used by this particular resource are almost all paraphrases and untrustworthy for honest Biblical study.

Also at issue in this resource is the fact that messengers of the Southern Baptist Convention have repeatedly and unequivocally rejected the New International Version which is the default version for this resource. Not only have messengers to the convention rejected the NIV, but they have asked LifeWay Christian Resources of the Southern Baptist Convention not to use the NIV. In the Son of God resource and in many others, the administration

and trustees of LifeWay have continually rejected the will of the convention in this matter.

Rejection of the gender-neutral NIV was clearly stated by messengers to the SBC in 1997, 2002, and 2011. The 2011 resolution encouraged pastors to make their congregations aware of translation errors of the 2011 NIV, requested LifeWay not to sell the NIV in its bookstores (it still does), and stated “profound disappointment” with Biblica (the new name of the International Bible Society, who translated the work) and Zondervan, which publishes the NIV. The 2002 SBC resolution was aimed at what was then called Today’s New International Version (TNIV). The TNIV was incorporated into the 2011 version with the “Today’s” designation dropped but the bulk of the material included. The NIV you purchase today *is* the TNIV of 2002. In the 2002 resolution, “agencies, boards, and publishing arms of the Southern Baptist Convention” were asked to “refrain from using this translation” in publications.

LifeWay Christian Resources of the Southern Baptist Convention needs a conservative resurgence, but that is a topic for another day.

Why was Jesus baptized?

The LifeWay resource begins by asking a legitimate question, “Why was Jesus baptized?” After all, He had no sin. From a legitimate question, Rick Warren then simply makes stuff up. He states that, “Jesus’ baptism was His way of identifying with sinful humanity...in His baptism, Jesus was showing us a way to live” (pg. 8). Is this really why Jesus was baptized? Is there any Scriptural evidence that Jesus was ‘identifying with sinful humanity’ in baptism, and “showing us a way to live?” Is it even theologically correct for the sinless Son of God to “identify with sinful humanity?” After all, He became flesh outside of human conception in order to be human without being connected to “sinful humanity.” Does Jesus use the Bill Clinton, “I feel your pain” slogan?

The reason for Jesus’ baptism is stated in Scripture: “to fulfill all righteousness” (Matthew 3:15). While a good Bible study would search the Scriptures to find insight into what that means, Warren simply makes a declaration that Jesus’ baptism was to identify with sinful humanity. It is beyond me how such identification with sinful humanity is a fulfillment of righteousness.

Movie Clip

Each session of the study includes a movie clip from *The Son of God* movie. In session 1, John the Baptist (complete with dreadlocks, because this was the hairstyle of ancient Jewish Levites?), had a slo-mo baptism complete with freaky background music and Jesus' instruction to John, "What you are doing is right, baptize me." Warren introduced the clip by saying that "When Jesus publically obeyed the Father in baptism, the Father publically affirmed Jesus as Son." While he may not have meant this to sound like the old adoptionist heresy, the "if/then" nature of the statement brings it close.

Warren continues to say that the Father affirmed Jesus as "my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." But then Warren states, "Do you know the Father says the same three things about you when you identify with him in baptism? You are my son or daughter, I love you, I'm proud of you." It is beyond inappropriate, in my opinion, to take the declaration of God toward Jesus and adopt it for ourselves and anyone who will be baptized.

Narcissism rules. In fact, John tells us that the sign of the Spirit was *the indicator that Jesus was the Messiah* (John 1:32-33). The declaration of the Father is something that we simply cannot adopt for ourselves and then distribute at-will to anyone who will be baptized (unless we are comfortable declaring ourselves to be the Messiah).

Also troublesome to me is Warren's question, "Do you want God to be pleased with you? Then you need to take the simple step of obedience and be baptized." This statement gives the impression that favor with God results from obedience in Baptism, which Warren says, "is not an option" (pg. 9). Without some clarification, a young believer could easily get into a works-based righteousness. Warren backed up his "baptism is not an option" teaching by quoting 1 John 2:3, "We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands" (NIV). If one studies 1 John, they would find out that 1 John 2:3 (nor anything in the entire epistle) is remotely about baptism.

Warren's final word about baptism is that it says you are not just a believer, "you're also a believer" (pg. 10). His use of Scripture for this teaching is one that is common in purpose-driven churches, and one that should raise a red flag in the mind of any reader. The Scripture quoted looks exactly like this —

“For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body...Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.” 1 Corinthians 12:13, 27, NIV.

Did you notice the subtlety? Between verses 13 and 27 are **13 skipped verses**, each glossed over by an ellipsis. As read in the LifeWay literature, one would see that Baptism makes you a believer, proven by the fact that, “we were all baptized...now you are the body.” Skipped is the fact that the passage is *not* about water baptism at all, and that verse 27 begins a new paragraph, and that the context is not about our *belonging* but about spiritual gifts and assignments.

LifeWay, Rick Warren, and the Son of God (part 2)

Dr. Randy White

In my last post, I began a review of LifeWay Christian Resource’s small-group “Bible study” resource based on the Mark Burnett and Roma Downey movie, the Son of God.” Subtitled, “The Life of Jesus in You,” the six-session guide is far more focused on you than on Jesus.

In this post, I want to cover session 2, “Jesus’ Temptation and Your Temptation.”

Each session includes a video clip along with Warren’s teaching. In the session 2 video clip, which presumably comes from “The Bible” television series and not the movie, Jesus walks weakly through the wilderness until He collapses on the dirt. Gasping for breath, a snake crawls out from under Him. Jesus, almost too weak to move, arises from the dirt and turns to see the black-robed Obama-looking Satan. I have heard that Satan was removed from the movie (due to political pressure?) which is why I presume this clip did not come from the actual movie. As the clip continued, the Obama/Satan character asked Jesus (in the second temptation) to “throw yourself down from this mountain.” The only problem is...that never happened. Satan tempted Jesus to throw Himself off the pinnacle of the temple, not a high mountain (with nobody at the bottom to even notice). (Advice to producers of movies about the Bible: it isn’t that hard to stick with the Scripture. When you change it, we think you are lazy or inept, or

perhaps have such a low budget you can't afford a Temple scene, or maybe you just think you can improve on Scripture?) In the third temptation (after a rather elaborate coronation "dream" in which Pilate kisses the feet of Jesus), Jesus says, "Back away from me, Satan," and the audience watches a snake slither into the distance.

From this scene, Rick Warren then gives "Seven Steps to Escape Temptation." The steps are basic, simple (even simplistic), and predictable. So predictable that I filled in the blanks before the answers were given—and got them all right, if not with the exact word at least with the same meaning. My guess is you can do the same.

1. Get into the _____.
2. Identify your _____.
3. _____ what you're _____ going to do.
4. Guard your _____.
5. Pray for _____.
6. Refocus your _____.
7. Find a _____.

In Warren's seven steps there is nothing unbiblical, but there is also nothing worth the effort. The material is so basic that anyone could come up with it, including a lost person. The material is not dependent upon the Holy Spirit or the Gospel. Warren calls these "seven Biblical steps" and "God's path of escape," but they are really just basic therapeutic maneuvers. If you study secular material on "how to break bad habits" you will find much the same kind of psycho-babble.

In the end, a participant in this small group "Bible study" would not really have any knowledge about the Temptation of Jesus. In fact, only if the participant looks to the last line of the session, in the "Diving Deeper" section would they even find the Biblical references to the Gospel accounts of the Temptation of Christ. That's right, this study of Jesus' temptation **never used any Scripture about Jesus' temptation**. The only material about the temptation comes from the movie clip. In the end, this is just a therapeutic session on some helpful hints to avoid bad activity.

If Jesus had done these seven steps, would they have helped Him? Of these seven steps, only one of them can even be drawn out of the Temptation

account (#1, Get into the Word). While it is a great point, since Jesus did use the Word in His battle with Satan, does the small-group participant know how to use the Word? After all, Satan also used the Word of God—as an instrument of temptation! The one studying these seven steps would go away with a therapeutic band-aid and little more.

Let Bible Study be a Study of the Bible

The problem, so typified in LifeWay’s “The Life of Jesus in You” resource, is that so-called Bible study is so empty of Bible content that a participant could not pass a basic Bible quiz on the biblical material, even immediately after completing the session. I encourage Bible study leaders to carefully scrutinize the resources they are using to make sure that they are actually leading Bible study—a study of the Bible—and not simply facilitating a nice, Bible-friendly discussion. If you are a Bible study leader, get rid of the idea that we need to tap into and focus on a “felt need.” Save such talk for felt-need studies. In a Bible study, study the Bible!