

It Really Is About Me...

and You Too!

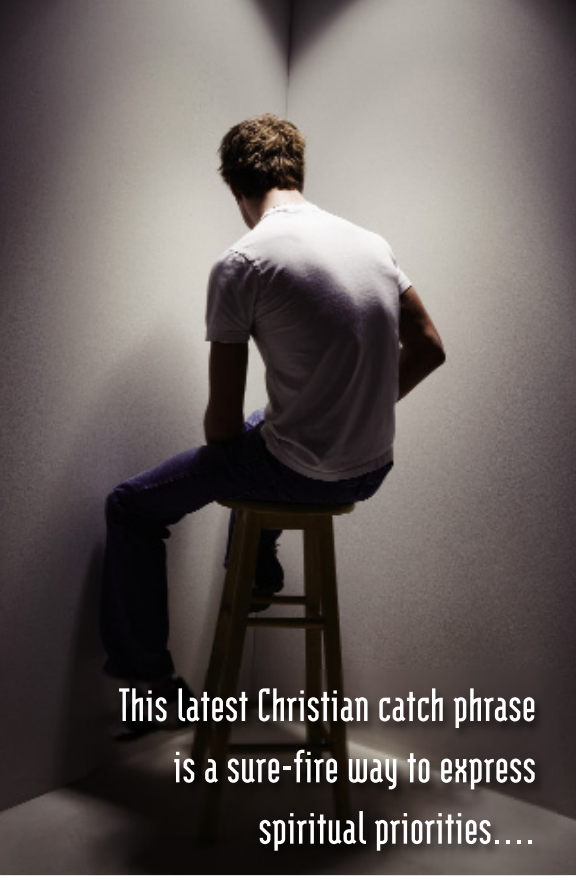
It's not about you." Perhaps you, like I, have often heard this phrase echoed on Sunday mornings, at Christian gatherings, and in online discussion groups. Made popular through Rick Warren's book *The Purpose Driven Life** where the phrase took on prime importance: Day 1, sentence one...its message now crosses denominational and generational lines, inhabits bookshelves and propagates through cyberspace.

Can you hear it whisper to your soul? *It's not about you.*

This latest Christian catch phrase is a sure-fire way to express spiritual priorities. It rings true for those of us who sang in Sunday school: "J-O-Y: Jesus first, yourself last, and others in-between." The refrain is heard again in the snappy, popular Christian song: "So Long Self" sung by MercyMe on their *Coming Up to Breathe* album. "So long, Self...don't take this wrong, but you were wrong for



by Rachel Ramer



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me...no, we can't be friends." Can
you hear it put to music? *It's not
about you.*

A Safeguard Against Me-ism

At last we can set our corner of the
world in order with this universal
truth. Perhaps we should state it as
a greeting, similar to the early
Christian salutation: "He is risen,
He is risen indeed!" Imagine the
bond we will feel with other Chris-
tians when we declare as a greet-
ing: "It's not about you!" We may
even use it like a talisman against
the blight of narcissism that curses
the human race, if we chant it long
enough and loud enough, that is.

It protects the heart of every
man, woman and child—no one
is left out—all the while, ironi-
cally, it leaves out everyone. *It's
not about YOU.*

Warren is right, of course. Nar-
cissism is a cancer that will de-
stroy us, one at a time, from the
inside out. Narcissism teaches us
to ignore the needs of others, to
seek after things which fill our
needs and wants alone. The pre-
occupation with self is an ane-
mic, distorted, self-crippling way
to live. It can also be expressed
through what looks like spiritual
self-denial where we consider our
works to be our credentials with
God, and certainly with others.
Narcissism doesn't care how we
express our self-centeredness.

There is truth here: So many
things are not about you, or me.
God can run the universe with-
out us. Mountains wouldn't
crumble; traffic wouldn't stop.
After we die, even our children
will go on without us. We really
want them to be able to do that,
don't we? And as a fair lady once
said to a certain, self-centered En-
glish professor:

*Without your pulling it, the tide
comes in,*

*Without your twirling it, the earth
can spin,*

*Without your pushing them, the
clouds roll by....*

More importantly, Jesus declared:
"If anyone wishes to come after
Me, let him deny himself, and take
up his cross, and follow Me."
(Matthew 16:24) There is a cause
greater than our own; there is a
purpose for our lives which doesn't
place us at the center. Jesus calls us
to suffer, to follow, to deny.

Another Shaming Tactic?

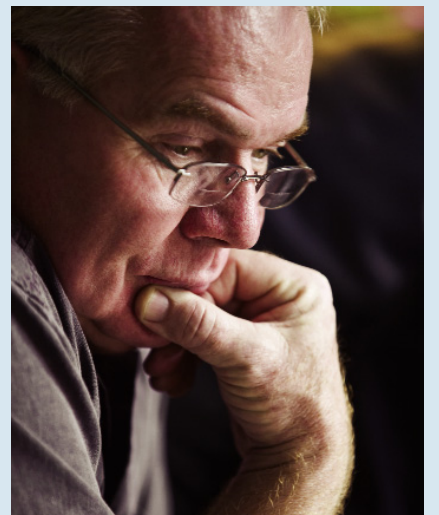
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ing permission to shame others. I
don't believe that was Warren's in-
tent, yet indiscriminate Christians
sprinkle this sentiment freely
throughout their interactions.

Christian counselor Jeff VanVon-
deren explains in *The Subtle Power
of Spiritual Abuse*, "Shame is not to
be confused with guilt....guilt is an
emotional indication about wrong
actions or attitudes.... Shame, on
the other hand, is a destructive sig-
nal about you and your worth. It is
the belief or mindset about your-
self—that you are bad, defective or
worthless as a person" (p. 55).

I never could quite understand
that if, in the Christian worldview,
we are to see ourselves as totally
bad, why shaming doesn't change
children to be good. Instead,
shaming assists in the outcome of
bad behavior. Affirming worth
based on their value as created in
the image of God, instead of on
their performance, gives children
the self assurance to be other-
focused. They can then mature to
suffer, to follow, to deny in a con-
text of Christ's calling and love,
not as self-debasement.

What does it do, I wonder, to
those who are already bogged
down with shame and self-
loathing when they hear that
God's primary message to them is
"It's not about you"? What of the
abused wife who comes to church
looking for a way out of the cruelty
she is subjected to and she is told
"It's not about you"?

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What about the overworked church volunteer who should be stepping down in order to create balance in his or her life, and the message “It’s not about you” comes from the pulpit? What about the people who need to know that they can come boldly to the throne of grace, and they are instead taught to be timid because it’s not about them.

Religious Control, or Freedom in Christ?

As we become more aware of the tactics of groups such as the Fundamentalist Latter Day Saints, we can hear them whisper to keep

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their members subjugated: “It’s not about you.” Shouldn’t it give us pause that this is the very message coming from within cults and aberrant groups?

If the gospel is not about us, then what is it really about? Is Jesus’ death not about us? Is the ministry of the Holy Spirit not about us? Is the Father’s love not about us?

“Then little children were brought to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray for them. But the disciples rebuked those who brought them” (Matthew 19:13).

Do you hear the message the disciples mistakenly conveyed to the children and the parents? Later, Jesus tells the story of the lost

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sheep. He does not state, “It’s not about that one sheep. Who has time for one? I have the ninety and nine here in the fold.” When he finds the sheep, does he scold, “I want to make this perfectly clear: It’s NOT ABOUT YOU”?

We have latched on to this phrase as though we are speaking some profound truth that does not need to be nuanced. But in our world, many spiritual truths are not one-size-fits-all. Pastors need to be aware of the damages done by such blanket statements and recognize the wounded people listening to their message.

The Gospel = Healthy Self-Acceptance

Ultimately, the result of this focus tends to backfire. While we attempt to eradicate self-centeredness, we will actually exacerbate self-preoccupation.

This self-abnegation is simply the flip side of the self-centered coin. In her book *Restoring the*

Christian Soul, Leanne Payne writes about narcissism:

Puberty and adolescence is the narcissistic stage for all of us.... To whatever degree we fail to emerge from this adolescent, narcissistic stage, we will be stuck in some form or manifestation of the wrong kind of self-love. Failing to love ourselves aright, we will love ourselves amiss. The rampant morbid practice of introspection is one of the most prevalent of these narcissistic manifestations.... To achieve a healthy personality, we must pass from this self-centered stage to self-acceptance that is full, secure. Whoever does not accept himself, is engrossed with himself (pp. 38-39).

This healthy self-acceptance comes not through what she refers

to as the “morbid practice of introspection” so often promoted in our churches and sold to our emotions as spiritual selflessness. Rather, it comes from rejoicing that even in our sinfulness and inadequacies, the gospel really is about us. Just as *childish* and *childlike* are not synonymous, *selfish* and *self-accepting* do not mean the same thing.

The Apostle Paul made a distinction: “I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature” (Romans 7:18). God de-



clared, after creating humans in his image that this creation was “very good.” It’s true that we cannot save ourselves. It’s not about us. It’s also true that we are the objects of God’s love.

I claim it anyway. It really is about me...and you too. □

*The purpose of this article is not to attack or discredit Rick Warren or his other-centered ministries. He is being used of God to teach others about the importance of service and sacrifice.

Rachel Ramer co-founded www.ill-legalism.com to help provide support for recovering legalists. She is also an instructor at www.crossingcurrents.com, an online, interactive Christian apologetics course for teens.