

Interview with Bill Hybels

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In 1974, Bill Hybels and a few other church leaders surveyed their Chicago community to find out why people weren't coming to church. "Church is boring," people replied. "They're always asking for money." "I don't like being preached down to." The answers shaped the new Willow Creek Church which grew from 125 to 2,000 in two years. By 2000, the South Barrington, Illinois flock numbered 15,000 a week and met in a 352,000-square-foot building. Now known as the prototypical megachurch, Willow Creek's four weekend services are "seeker sensitive", with the mid-week "new community" services providing teaching for believers. Many are enthusiastic about Hybels' achievements, others call it "market driven philosophy" with similarities to Walmart. Hybels maintains a regular teaching schedule at Willow Creek, but travels abroad, teaching church leaders how to manage and direct their congregations in more effective ways. Married 33 years, Bill and his wife Lynne have two adult children and one grandchild. Bill talked with Servant about his new book Just Walk Across the Room, controversy, and what he'd most like to be remembered for.

Servant: Hello Bill.

Bill Hybels: Where am I calling you from?

S: I think you're in Colorado.

B: [laughs]

S: I'm in Alberta, Canada, north of Calgary at Prairie Bible College.

B: I haven't been there. I've always wanted to go to Banff or Lake Louise. If someone wanted me to come and speak I would probably feel a little more led by God if they offered to put me up at Banff or something.

S: We'll have to do that. Okay, I'll start with the toughest question I can think of: are the Bears going to win the Superbowl?

B: They may have gotten as close to it as we're going to see in my lifetime. I have no idea.

S: So you're not going to step out on that one.

B: When it comes to football, we walk by sight, not by faith.

S: You're a wise man. We're going to feature your book *Just Walk Across the Room* in this issue. You talk in the first part about the single greatest gift. What is it?

B: The greatest gift you can give a human being is an introduction to the God who loves them. We love giving gifts. We love to buy family birthday presents and Christmas presents. We love to commemorate special occasions with friends and when we go to someone's house we like to bring food or wine or something. But we tend to forget that the single greatest gift we can give another human being is the understanding of how sin gets paid for and how forgiveness is granted in God's eyes and what will happen in their lives if they open it up to God and his activity. We think we're in the selling business or product distribution business or something when really we're in the gift-giving business. If I keep that perspective it helps me.

S: What would you say is the most important thing that needs to take place in us before we get to the point where we're going to want to give that gift?

B: If the truth be told, the people I know who live with the highest evangelistic awareness are people who are profoundly moved still to this day by their own salvation. So people who have been wrecked by grace, who really did feel a total redirecting of the course of their life by the power of God, people who have had heavy burdens lifted and bad sins forgiven, they are the ones who find it quite natural to want that for their friends. A pretty good question for believers to ask themselves is this: is the life you're living right now something that you would wish upon a friend? If you can't answer that in the affirmative, then of course you need to take another look at your life. But if you can say I would want someone to live with the sense of companionship with God that I feel and I would want them to have the guidance available to them that I feel is available to me. And I would want someone to have a sense of security about their eternity that I enjoy today, then you know something's aligning right inside of you. When you're living in the love of God in that way you just want it for everyone.

S: It's been said that believers and unbelievers both have something in common: we're both uptight about evangelism. What would you tell those who say, "Well, Bill, that's easy for you."

You're outgoing; you've got your stuff together. I can't tell others about Christ to save my life, let alone someone else's"?

B: I would say you're probably trying to be someone you're not and I would hesitate to urge anyone to do that because I think it only does damage. I think there's somebody out there who needs a word from Christ from someone who thinks they're not smart enough or tall enough or extroverted enough. That's the beautiful thing about how diverse our world is. There are a lot of people who need words from God said to them in a different way than you or I would express it. So when people say, I'm a little young for this, I tell them there are some people who will only respond to Christ if they hear it from a young person. If someone says I'm too old, I tell them there are some people who will only take it from an old guy. I don't have my college degree—there are some people who would be put off if you did have one. So be who you are. A bigger issue to me is to help people understand the concept of open doors and closed doors that I talk quite a bit about in the book. The apostle Paul asked the church at Colossae to pray for him, that God would give him open doors because he knew that you can't shove the gospel through a closed door. It gets damaged in the process. The bigger issue is to be praying every day for open doors and then to be attentive to the prompting of the Holy Spirit as to whether this is an open door, a partially open door or a closed door. Because if it's a closed door you might as well amp down. There's nothing constructive that can happen if that door is closed. If someone says I don't want to talk about it, then don't talk about it. There's a hundred other subjects that are fun to talk about. You don't only have to talk about God. Talk about golf. Talk about politics, about food, about exercise. Talk about your kids or whatever. That's permissible.

S: When I was young I carried guilt with me at all times when it came to sharing my faith. I would sit on an airplane thinking, we're probably gonna crash and everyone on here will all go to hell as a result of me not standing right now and sharing my testimony. Is that your story?

B: No. But I certainly understand the teaching that puts people in the position you just described. I think it's paralyzing and here's the reason. Jesus said to be as wise as serpents and as gentle as doves. And that means to have relational intelligence. If you've got pressure inside

of you, a theological drumbeat going on in the background saying if you don't witness in this situation you're not a committed Christian and then you have relational intelligence pressures that you feel real solid about—in other words you know it would be damaging to this relationship and really counterproductive if I violate what my relational intelligence is telling my right now—well, a collision of those two pressures can be really devastating. I think that's precisely why the scriptures tell us to walk by faith and not by sight, to be led by the Spirit of God because the Spirit has to arbitrate in that moment between those opposing internal pressures. I've had it go both ways. There have been times when I've had the Spirit say I know you think this is going to blow relational intelligence rules if you say a bold word right now. I'm asking you to say a bold word. And I walk away from those things saying, man, I wouldn't have played it that way. And then other times I've heard the Spirit say this looks like it could be opening up nicely. I want you to be quiet and I don't want you to go down that road. And I go, really? My intuition would have appraised it a different way. That's why it's so critical to recognize that the highest value in this whole adventure is attentiveness to and cooperation with the Holy Spirit.

S: I sat on a plane recently with a guy who was a psychologist. He found out pretty quickly that I was a Christian and he said, “Man, I’ve had bad experience with Christians.” I said, “Really? Me too.” And he started to laugh and we talked for the entire four-hour flight and had a blast. It’s taken years for me to get rid of the guilt and realize that you do this out of love for the Lord.

B: And love for the individual. A speaker or a writer has to methodically convince the learner that if everything is really lined up right in evangelism you long for the well-being of the person you're in the conversation with. Just saying this is the right thing to do or I'll get in trouble if I don't pass these words on or I'll be responsible and his blood will be on my hands if this doesn't all turn out right, these motivations generally compromise a long-term commitment to evangelism. When you can get it aligned and you look at an individual thinking I really do wish he had a clean conscience and a guide for his life, I really do wish this guy had a sense of the companionship of Christ every day in this life, I wish he could relate to eternity, that he could know that God answers prayer and will protect his kids—then

there's an ease of conversation that flows because you're not selling him, you just wish him well and want the best for him.

S: In Kennedy's "Evangelism Explosion," decades ago, he said we should ask two questions to start a conversation with a prospective convert. I think the first was "Can you say you know for certain that if you were to die today you'd go to heaven," and the second was, "if God were to say to you, why should I let you into heaven, what would you say?" Have you seen those questions change over the decades? Are people willing to listen?

B: How you start a spiritual conversation has taken on a whole new significance. If you ask the eternity question first of people who are pretty much sold out to an existential here and now world and life view you've disconnected before you even remember each other's first names. I'm an eternity guy, but I know myself well enough that if someone stopped me in an airport or at a train station and started talking about some world that was going to happen a whole long time beyond what I was focusing on that day I think I'd say thanks but no thanks, I'm just trying to find my way to work here. So I really do think this is an era that requires a completely different outlook and way of conversing with people that's more natural and ways of communicating that lead to further dialogue instead of conversation enders. There really are laws of supply and demand in human discourse. So if I'm talking with someone on a plane and 30 minutes into the flight the guy says to me, Do you have kids, I wouldn't try to be clever and say, Hey, I have spiritual kids. I would take that as a signal that he's about done with spiritual things right now and would like to move on to another legitimate subject of interest. But a lot of Christians have been so programmed to blow through these discernable mile markers and to not follow their relational intuition that they end up doing bad damage with a great message.

S: I guess we recall that we talked about hockey. So you're saying I shouldn't have told him that "the goal of you life needs to be..."?

B: [laughs]

S: You say the only mission in life worth pursuing is finding those who are lost, serving those who are under-resourced and loving those who have been forgotten. Tell me about the latter two,

especially about how you've been living that out in Africa and other places?

B: I think earlier in my life the main thing I wanted to make sure of was that people in and around my circle of relationships had the sin issue settled. I wanted to make sure that their soul was saved. In more recent years I've understood the gospel more holistically and now I want to make sure that the kingdom of God is established here on earth, which means we have more than souls to save, we have a world to fix. These two should not be set off as tensions toward each other; I think they fit hand in glove. If you care for someone's soul you'll care for their body and their belly and their education and their children and their diseases and all of that. So I think it's been a gradual maturation process where I've come to see the gospel as more than just an antidote to the sin problem; it's really the hope of a broken world.

S: Anyone who's been on the front lines as you have has taken some shrapnel. You've been criticized. Are there things you're doing now at Willow Creek that you wish you had done or emphasized earlier in your ministry?

B: I really don't spend a whole lot of time looking in the past and figuring what I could or should have done differently for the simple reason that I probably had to go through what I went through to get where I got. So when I look in the future I say I'll bet five years from now I'll have so much more insight on this or that. But I can't microwave that. I have to live life every day and make the choices that I believe the Spirit of God and the Word of God are wanting me to make and I'm free to let others complete the long list of the mistakes I've made. I just keep forward-looking.

S: In 2000, you took much criticism for interviewing Bill Clinton for 90 minutes at a leadership conference. Was there a time when you said to yourself, I'm here to preach the gospel, not to spend a lot of time at the White House?

B: Again I really do believe in the promptings of the Holy Spirit and the way that whole friendship with Clinton unfolded, as best I could discern it along with people who know me well, it seemed like that was what the Spirit of God wanted me to do for a specific length of time. I really don't look back and try to rate the investment. I discern the obedience. I think I did what God wanted me to do. Sometimes those

things play out wonderfully and you can use it as a sermon illustration and then there are other times when they don't play out as much as you hoped or prayed they would. But we have to decide if we're going to obey the Spirit's prompting and I think I did. I've been kidded about that by people who sort of indicate to me that had I poured my time into someone else...how can you ever know that? Whenever the Spirit's prompting me to disciple someone or to coach someone or I've mentored a lot of pastors—but I never know how that investment of myself or my experiences is going to play out. It could be a grand slam, it could be a strike out. That's why the importance has to be on whether I feel whether God is guiding me to do this and if the answer is yes, the fruit is his department and I can sleep at night.

S: Up here in Canada we've just had a Christian TV personality admit to a three-year affair. What do you do to be accountable?

B: I think every leader has to come up with his or her own accountability philosophy. For instance a leader who has a lot of financial decisions and has to deal with a lot of kingdom resources needs structures in place and safeguards and systems to help you do what in your heart you want to do, which is to be honorable. I find that in each area of my life I need to take responsibility for the construction of an infrastructure and people who will do watch-care for me so that five years or ten years from now I will wind up with clean hands and a pure heart. Almost every pastor I know who has wound up in a ditch of whatever kind, they had accountability structures around them and just gamed them. Sometimes younger leaders get all powered up and they're sure they will never give in to temptation if they ring themselves with a particular kind of accountability. You can have multiple layers of accountability but at the end of the day if you want to game them, you will. So don't put your ultimate trust in your accountability structures. It's better that you put it in God and have some supports around you.

S: What would you like people to take away from the book?

B: That pointing people to Christ is something I can do and I can do it naturally and joyfully and not with a sense of burden or drudgery. After 5 or 10 years of the Christian life the average person concludes that evangelism is not something I'm good at so I'll do less of it. None of us likes to do something we're not good at. So they have a few frustrating

outings, a few rejections and people think they're no good at it and they give up. I hope with this book that people would actually look at evangelism a little differently and say, wait a minute, if evangelism is really about raising about raising up your awareness of the promptings of the Holy Spirit and praying for open doors and telling a short concise story of what God's done in your life and serving and loving people—I can do that. I'd like to have people's awareness raised and have their sense that God can use them stay at an increased level the rest of their life.

S: Can you think of one thing you'd do sooner if you were younger?

B: I'd sail around the world.

S: Jerry Fallwell was buried last week and people had much to say about his legacy. What would you like people to say about Bill Hybels when you're gone?

B: That he thought the local church was the hope of the world.

S: What would you like your children to say about their dad when you're gone?

B: He was the biggest cheerleader I had.

S: Right on.