



Bob Burney

## The Willow Creek model: 'We made a mistake'

If you are older than 40 the name Benjamin Spock is more than familiar. It was Spock that told an entire generation of parents to take it easy, don't discipline your children and allow them to express themselves. Discipline, he told us, would warp a child's fragile ego. Millions followed this guru of child development and he remained unchallenged among child rearing professionals. However, before his death Dr. Spock made an amazing discovery: He was wrong. In fact, he said:

"We have reared a generation of brats. Parents aren't firm enough with their children for fear of losing their love or incurring their resentment. This is a cruel deprivation that we professionals have imposed on mothers and fathers. Of course," we did it with the best of intentions. We didn't realize until it was too late how our know-it-all attitude was undermining the self assurance of parents."

Oops.

Something just as momentous, in my opinion, just happened in the evangelical community. For most of a generation evangelicals have been romanced by the "seeker-sensitive" movement spawned by Willow Creek Community Church in Chicago. The guru of this movement is Bill Hybels. He and others have been telling us for decades to throw out everything we have previously thought and been taught about church growth and replace it with a new paradigm, a new way to do ministry.

Perhaps inadvertently, with this "new wave" of ministry came a de-emphasis on taking personal responsibility for Bible study combined with an emphasis on felt needs based "programs" and slick marketing.

The size of the crowd rather than the depth of the heart determined success. If the crowd was large then surely God was blessing the ministry. Churches were built by demographic studies, professional strategists, marketing research, meeting "felt needs" and sermons consistent with these techniques. We were told that preaching was out, relevance was in. Doctrine didn't matter nearly as much as innovation. If it wasn't "cutting edge" and consumer friendly it was doomed. The mention of sin, salvation and sanctification were taboo and replaced by Starbucks, strategy and sensitivity.

Thousands of pastors hung on every word that emanated from the lips of the church growth experts. Satellite seminars were packed with hungry church leaders learning the latest way to "do church." The promise was clear: Thousands of people and millions of dollars couldn't be wrong. Forget what people need, give them what they want. How can you argue with the numbers? If you dared to challenge the "experts" you were immediately labeled as a "traditionalist," a throwback to the '50s, a stubborn dinosaur unwilling to change with the times.

All that changed recently.

## **Study finds method shallow**

Willow Creek has released the results of a multi-year study on the effectiveness of their programs and philosophy of ministry. The study's findings are in a new book titled "Reveal: Where Are You?," co-authored by Cally Parkinson and Greg Hawkins, executive pastor of Willow Creek' Community Church. Hybels himself called the findings "ground breaking," "earth shaking" and "mind blowing."

And no wonder: It seems that the "experts" were wrong.

The report reveals that most of what they have been doing for these many years and what they have taught millions of others to do is not producing solid disciples of Jesus Christ. Numbers yes, but not disciples. It gets worse. Hybels laments:

"Some of the stuff that we have put millions of dollars into thinking it would really help our people grow and develop spiritually, when the data actually came back it wasn't helping people that much. Other things that we didn't put that much money into and didn't put much staff against is stuff our people are crying out for."

## **Bible or bust**

If you simply want a crowd, the "seeker-sensitive" model produces results. If you want solid, sincere, mature followers of Christ, it's a bust. In a shocking confession, Hybels states:

"We made a mistake. What we should have done when people crossed the line of faith and become Christians, we should have started telling people and teaching people that they have to take responsibility to become 'self feeders.' We should have gotten people, taught people, how to read their Bible between services, how to do the spiritual practices much more aggressively on their own."

Incredibly, the guru of church growth now tells us that people need to be reading their Bibles and taking responsibility for their spiritual growth.

Just as Spock's "mistake" was no minor error, so the error of the seeker-sensitive movement is monumental in its scope. The foundation of thousands of American churches is now discovered to be mere sand. ! The one individual who has had perhaps the greatest influence on the American church in our generation has now admitted his philosophy of ministry, in large part, was a "mistake." The extent of this error defies measurement.-

Perhaps the most shocking thing of all in this revelation coming out of Willow Creek is in a summary statement by Greg Hawkins:

"Our dream is that we fundamentally change the way we do church. That we take out a clean sheet of paper and we rethink all of our old assumptions. Replace it with new insights. Insights that are informed by research and rooted in Scripture. Our dream is really to discover what God is doing and how he's asking us to transform this planet."

Isn't that what we were told when this whole seeker-sensitive' thing started? The church growth gurus again want to throwaway their old assumptions and "take out a clean sheet of paper" and, presumably, come up with a new paradigm for ministry.

## **Encouraging development**

Should this be encouraging? Please note that "rooted in Scripture" still follows "rethink," "new insights" and "informed research." Someone, it appears, still might not

get it. Unless there is a return to simple biblical (and relevant) principles, a new faulty scheme will replace the existing one and another generation will follow along as the latest piper plays.

What we should find encouraging, at least, in this "confession" coming from the highest ranks of the Willow Creek Association is that they are coming to realize that their existing "model" does not help people grow into mature followers of Jesus Christ. Given the massive influence this organization has on the American church today, let us pray that God would be pleased to put structures in place at Willow Creek that foster not mere numeric growth, but growth in grace.

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