

## **Artizo Discussion Paper – Section: Evangelize Boldly**

### **Bill Hybels on Evangelism**

*As founding and senior pastor of Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, Ill. (willowcreek.org), Bill Hybels leads one of the country's largest and most influential churches. To train church leaders, Hybels and his colleagues founded the Willow Creek Association in 1991, which now includes more than 11,600 churches worldwide. In his latest book, *Just Walk Across the Room* (Zondervan), Hybels turns his focus to personal evangelism. During a recent phone interview, he talked with Outreach about what he believes is the single-highest value in evangelism, changing course at Willow Creek and the ritual that brings him to his knees each morning.*

*Interview by Lindy Lowry from Outreach magazine, November/December 2006*

**Outreach:** What prompted you to write about personal evangelism for this latest book? Did you sense a real need to focus on it?

**Bill Hybels:** Yes. Just in the last 30 years, I've seen an incredible surge in Christians knowing how to share with other Christians. They know how to open up their lives to each other, how to ask for help, how to pray for each other.

But in the same time period, I have not seen near the same progress in Christians feeling comfortable in conversations with people outside the circle of faith.

What have our local churches missed then? Why are we producing Christians who aren't comfortable talking about spirituality with others who don't share their beliefs?

**BH:** So much of it is awareness, vision and training. Churches left to themselves will always devolve into a kind of inward-looking dynamic. They have to be inspired to be outreach-oriented. And they have to instill a love for Jesus. People who walk across rooms have landed on the belief that the God they know is worth knowing.

Moreover, we have to teach people to engage in conversations with those who believe differently than they do or maybe don't have any spiritual beliefs at all. Personal evangelism, or having conversations about God, with people far from God should eventually become as natural to us as breathing.

What's the best way, based on your experience, to train leaders to instill in their congregations a passion for connecting with the unchurched?

BH: When we train pastors, the first thing we do is point them to the example of our ultimate leader, Jesus Christ. We point out dozens of passages where the scriptures inform us of how naturally Jesus had conversations with people. He invited himself to Zacchaeus' house for dinner, even when everyone knew he was a crook. Jesus said to him, "You're someone I would be very interested in having dinner with, and I'd be curious to know your story!" So looking at the Master Evangelist and the ease with which He had conversations with people outside the circle of faith becomes catalytic in the lives of church leaders.

From there, we explain to pastors that lost people really do matter to the Father, and if they matter to Him, they ought to matter to us. Then I try to inspire pastors from a spiritual formation standpoint, explaining that there is a unique work of God that happens in the life of someone who's serious about spreading the message of Christ.

You've experienced that work of God firsthand?

BH: Yes, I'm involved in a sailing team, and we've become very close. I've watched some of them over the years head down the road to self-destruction because of substance abuse or thrill-seeking behaviors. And it's absolutely heart-breaking to know and love someone and watch him try to handle the complexities of life without the help and guidance of a loving God. It makes me pray differently. It helps me preach differently. There is a marvelous spiritual formation thing that happens inside someone who's serious about evangelism, but it only happens when you stick your neck out and get involved in evangelistic endeavors.

Then what keeps people from engaging? What do you identify as the greatest obstacle to evangelism today?

BH: Fear. The average Christian in today's churches is afraid she won't get something right or that someone will ask her a question she can't answer and she'll blow the whole thing.

And I say to people, "OK, then let's talk about fear!" If you could hear the voice of God prompt you to walk across the room and start a conversation and you obeyed – even if, by your standard, it didn't lead anywhere – if that hearing and obeying constituted success, could you do that? Most people say, "Yes, I could do that."

Then what if the conversation progressed to you asking him about his spiritual background? If that conversation goes nowhere, would you still be OK, knowing that you heard God and obeyed? What if he asks you for a book or CD, and that doesn't go any further, would you still feel like you succeeded spiritually because you heard and obeyed?

The idea of doing only what the Spirit prompts and not being responsible for necessarily leading someone to Christ or correctly answering a ton of questions just boggles people's minds. When you break down evangelism to small interactions, people tend to relax a little.

Many Christians are afraid that starting spiritual conversations may strong-arm or create distance between friends or family members.

BH: I remember talking to the spouse of a guy on my sailing team. About the third time I talked to her, I gently tried to steer the conversation to spiritual matters, and she said, "I had a horrible religious experience. This is such an area of pain for me; let's give this a rest."

I told her I wanted to honor her request and then asked, "How long should we rest it? Can I check back with you in six months or a year to see if there has been any healing? I'd like to pray for you along the way, so you tell me when would be a good time to check back." She kind of laughed and said, "Let's rest it for at least a year."

A year later, we'd gotten to know each other a lot better, and she'd seen me in a lot of other situations. She was ready to talk. I'd proven my friendship to her and the rest of the crew members. And I had honored her by taking seriously her request to not talk about God until she was ready.

In other words, it all unfolded naturally. In our efforts to train Christians to share their faith, have we become too focused on strategies and methods?

BH: It's taken me the better part of my adult life to understand this. But I believe the single-highest value in the personal evangelistic adventure is being attentive to and being cooperative with the promptings of the Holy Spirit! People don't expect me to say that. They think I'm nuts to connect promptings and the works of the Holy Spirit with old-fashioned soul-winning, which just shows you how far sharing our faith has strayed from what it ought to be. We ought to begin our day by telling the Holy Spirit that in every

conversation we have today, we'll be listening for His voice or to the little cues that people drop. Maybe they're only one resource—a conversation, an invitation from a friend or a copy of their own Bible—away from really making spiritual progress.

I'm not suggesting a new evangelism program or new formulas or things to memorize. I am saying that being more attentive to and cooperative with the Holy Spirit would open more doors of opportunity—to say a word for God, or to listen to an unsaved person's story—than you can imagine!

You're talking about seeing evangelism as a process then, rather than a one-time event in someone's life.

BH: We used to think the only miracle in the evangelistic process that we could anticipate would be that singular time when a person dropped to her knees and prayed the prayer to trust Christ. But I find that the evangelistic adventure is filled with a whole string of mini-miracles from the first time you watch the love of God melt a hard heart of a non-church person.

Often, we miss the beauty of going through the process with people from -10 in their relationship with God, up to -8, -4, 2. We need to learn to see the whole experience of listening to people's pain and their story before we feel the need to tell our story—and live with the idea that maybe we're only supposed to be warming up these people gradually.

How can churches equip their congregations to tell their story of faith? Is there a practical teaching tool you've used?

BH: A couple of years ago at our mid-week service, I preached on the importance of telling your story and telling it effectively. Afterward, we flashed an e-mail address on the screen and asked people to write in 100 words or less their story of how they came to Christ and e-mail it to us. A whole team of people helped me go through thousands of e-mails, and we returned their e-mails saying, "Way to go!" or "This part needs work," or "There was an air of superiority in your story, so do it again and e-mail us the revision." We were dead serious about it, but as a result, folks at Willow got really good at shaping their brief, clear and humble faith stories.

These days, a lot of churches don't have a mid-week service, and it's not often that they use the weekend worship service to do evangelism training. Have you seen an increasing number of churches that don't really have an outlet for it?

BH: I have. Sometimes, the only delivery system for a church that has only a weekend service is through its small groups. But I also feel that the value of personal evangelism is mission-critical enough that a pastor could easily call together the congregation and say, "Look, we're going to offer four additional classes to go through this material to get everybody dialed in and thinking about evangelism."

When a pastor takes a blow torch to one of his or her church's core values, the Spirit of God tends to swing spiritual doors wide open.

I know that Willow Creek recently adopted the neighborhood connection model that Randy Frazee implemented at Pantego in Fort Worth, Texas, before coming to Willow two years ago. Why the shift?

BH: We asked the question, "If our people are going to make an evangelistic impact throughout the next 10 to 15 years of their lives, where might they focus that evangelistic energy?" Because people change jobs so often now, which didn't happen 30 years ago, and because commute times are so long, there are really only two places left where people have some measurable amount of stability and where they can anticipate having time available with people who are outside the family of faith—their job and neighborhood.

And are you seeing it work?

BH: Turning Willow is like turning the Titanic. So it has taken Randy almost a full year to instill the neighborhood values and strategy into our staff and leaders. We really just ramped up in September. Training people on how to have conversations naturally, how to listen to others' stories before telling your own and then how to tell your story is essential to making this neighborhood ministry really work. A lot of prayer has gone into the launch of this ministry.

That reminds me of something I heard about a morning ritual of yours. Several years ago, you began getting out of bed literally on your knees to start the day with prayer. Is that still a habit?

BH: It is! I did it this morning, in fact. It takes a little finagling to get my hips and legs to swing just right, so that my knees come down before my feet, but it's a necessary exercise to counteract my Type-A tendencies. If I get out of bed and my feet hit the floor first, then I'm off to the races with my own program. For me to stay on God's program, I have to start early, surrender early and make an early request of Him to be used that day. I tell Him I desire His guidance and ask Him to open spiritual doors throughout my day.

When you start to look at evangelism in that light, you see yourself differently – not as a sales person – but as an instrument in the hands of God.

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***Questions:***

***1) What did you learn about evangelism from this article if:***

***a) You are a layperson in a church?***

***b) You are leading a ministry?***

***2) How do you instill a culture of evangelism in a church or ministry that doesn't currently have one? Think about the theology of doing this as well as the practical steps.***