

Found this interesting  
and worth passing along...  
-LM

# Weeping for Willow's Disciples

Willow Creek repents! The evil barbarians have admitted they were wrong. Seeker churches are bad. John MacArthur is the man. And we knew it all along: Seeker churches do not produce disciples—and even Bill Hybels sees that now!

Too bad that's not what he or the Willow team said last October, when the church released its findings from a multiyear study evaluating which of its programs and activities were actually helping people mature spiritually and which were not. They also told the story in the book *Reveal: Where Are You?* (Willow Creek Association), co-authored by Willow Creek Executive Pastor Greg Hawkins. Christian blogs buzzed with opinion and Willow-bashing. But rather than listening to all the giddy voices, let's take a look at what Hybels actually said during Willow's Leadership Summit last year:

"We made a mistake. What we should have done when people crossed the line of faith and became 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."

Now, I must confess: I am not a big proponent of seeker-driven churches. My understanding of church heads in a different direction. I think we need to take seekers into account when we plan what we do, and make church "seeker comprehensible." But, I want our gathered worship to be driven more by worship and word. I have learned a lot, however, from Bill Hybels about loving the lost, making sure my message is understandable and having a compelling vision.

And now I am learning more about how to honestly admit a mistake.

Hybels indicated that the emphasis on programs and meetings did not produce disciples. What does make disciples? LifeWay Research will soon be releasing a study that looks at more than 2,500 people and tracks their spiritual formation over time (longitudinally) to answer that very question. Here are some things we have already found.

First, genuinely seeking God in one's life produces the fruit of discipleship in a way that participating in weekly church activities

**"The real question is this: Does your church obey the Great Commission?"**

cannot. Second, being in a small community makes a big difference. Those who were in small groups showed remarkably more maturity than those who were not.

But the elephant in evangelicalism is this: We have spruced up the worship service, spiked up the sermons and become great at organization—all the while failing to produce real disciples.

If Willow wants to use drama and have everyone on the worship team wear matching shirts, great. If you want to wear a suit, sing from a hymnal and yell when you preach, super. But the real question is this: Does your church obey the Great Commission? And the command of the Great Commission was not just to "go" (that was assumed), but to "make disciples."

I am glad Willow takes discipleship seriously enough to ask hard questions and then seek the answers. I am just a bit worried that all the "I told you so's" might be distracting people from caring and doing something about the 70% young-adult dropout rate at most Protestant churches, or the huge divorce epidemic, or the increasing porn addiction in the Church. I know many Willow haters don't care for "relevance." I can hear it now: "Brother, we don't need to be relevant. We just need to preach the Word."

But let's remember one of the four things from LifeWay's recent dropout study that was most predictive of keeping young adults in church: Young adults were more likely to stay in church when they considered the sermons and teaching relevant to their daily lives.

So, after your Sunday message railing against Willow and relevance, make sure to stand at the back door and watch the 20-year-olds say goodbye. You probably won't see them next week if *not* being relevant is a core value of your church.

Relevance matters. Willow is not repenting of relevance; they are repenting of what 95% of churches in America should also repent: not creating Christ-honoring, spiritually formed disciples. So rather than "Let's get Willow!" can we try, "Let's get serious?"

You may not like seeker churches. Great. But listen to what Hybels said, then take a look at your church's programs and ask, "How many disciples are we really making?" I think you might be surprised.

*Dr. Ed Stetzer is director of LifeWay Research and LifeWay's missiologist-in-residence. To dialogue with him about this column, contact him at [EStetzer@Outreachmagazine.com](mailto:EStetzer@Outreachmagazine.com).*