

# Willow Creek Community Church

## - A Mixed Review -

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I heard of Bill Hybels and the Willow Creek Community Church for the first time in 1992. At that time hardly anyone knew of the large church on the outskirts of the Chicago metropolis with its 8 million inhabitants. Now, however, Willow Creek is being talked about by everyone. As a result of lectures at various meetings and at both congresses in Hamburg in November of 1996 the concept of "church for the un-churched" has become a much discussed subject. In addition the entire evangelical press has been reporting, for the most part positively, on these matters. And then there is the perfect marketing strategy of the mega-church, which constantly provides the book, cassette and CD market with new products from the Chicago suburb of Barrington.

For several years now I have been actively involved in thinking through the Willow Creek phenomenon. In March of 1997, while on a study trip to America, I stayed for a week in Chicago. I would like to describe the result of my investigations, observations and conversations as follows: Willow Creek – one laughing and one weeping eye.

### Those things which positively impressed me

#### **1. The missionary passion of Bill Hybels and his staff members.**

Bill Hybels is a man with soul. If he speaks about the love of God to lost people, tears well up in his eyes. I believe his missionary passion is genuine. I believe his concern for the unchurched is real. Since the beginning of the church in 1975 Hybels has been concerned about the salvation of people. The main goal of the entire ministry at Willow Creek is to make non-religious people into ardent followers of Christ. To achieve this goal, Hybels and many of his staff members have driven themselves to the limits of their human endur-

ance.<sup>1</sup> That is absolutely commendable. We can learn much from this missionary zeal.

#### **2. The genuine desire to establish new testament local churches**

From the beginning, Bill Hybels was fascinated by the description of the church in Acts 2. During his studies at Trinity College he was influenced by Dr. Gilbert Bilezikian's concept of the church<sup>2</sup>, who emphasized the special significance of the first chapters of Acts for church planting. Hybels wanted from the very beginning to plant genuine new testament churches. Acts 2 and 4 became his ideal and his model.<sup>3</sup>

#### **3. The concept of commitment**

The Willow Creek church grew out of an evangelistic youth ministry. That is not an insignificant factor relating to his understanding of the church. Bill Hybels called people to faith in Christ. He also wanted, however, to gather the believers together. Gradually church structures emerged which require deep commitment. The church distinguishes, for example, very carefully between eternal membership in "the worldwide church, the body the Christ", and participating membership "in a particular local church".<sup>4</sup>

The latter is recommended for all the believers at Willow Creek. Before an interested person is presented as a new "member" of the church, he is carefully led through several preparatory steps.<sup>5</sup> When I consider how many Christians in German churches are listed under the category of "guests" and / or "visitors", I find the concept of commitment at Willow Creek exemplary. The question of why in April of 1996 there were "only" 2010

<sup>1</sup> Hybels, Lynne & Bill: *Ins Kino gegangen und Gott getroffen*, Projection J, Wiesbaden 1995, p.48

<sup>2</sup> WCCC Church Leaders Handbook New Expanded 1996 Edition, 3rd ed. p.47

<sup>3</sup> Hybels, Lynne & Bill: *Ins Kino gegangen und Gott getroffen*, p.187-198

<sup>4</sup> WCCC Church Leaders Handbook p.69-70

<sup>5</sup> *ibid* p.70

committed members will be discussed elsewhere in this document.<sup>6</sup>

#### **4. The desire that the love of God in human relationships become concrete**

Pastor Hybels never tires of emphasizing the significance of love and caring in interpersonal relationships. As I personally experienced during my visit, this aspect is applied primarily in the small groups. Such a group is composed of 8-12 participants. The church has currently about 1300 small groups. My companions and I were impressed by how openly the members of the group shared their joys and griefs and how intensely they prayed for each other. It is obvious that a church of this type cannot get along without small groups. For that reason it is emphasized in Willow Creek that the church does not have small groups, but that it is made up of small groups.

#### **5. The desire to have workers exercise their gifts**

In Willow Creek it is expected that all Christians join a small group, attend the mid-week service and apply their gifts in the context of the church ministry. The so-called "Five G's" are emphasized heavily. They include in addition to grace, growth, group and good stewardship, the area of the gifts as well.<sup>7</sup> It is my conviction that this is a biblical concept. Mature disciples of Jesus Christ should know their individual gifts and exercise them for the common good of the church. Of course other positive aspects of the Willow Creek ministry could be mentioned. This listing is surely not exhaustive. But I have mentioned those things which impressed me most deeply. This has been then, in the language of my illustration, the laughing eye.

### **Why criticize?**

*"Do not despise prophetic utterances. But examine everything [carefully]; hold fast to that which is good; abstain from every form of evil." (I Thess. 5:20-22)*

#### **1. The bible does not cover up the negative side**

I am sure some readers wish that I would end here. Last year, after I had publicly made a critical remark about the Willow Creek concept, a young theologian wrote to me that Paul had encouraged the Thessalonians simply to examine everything

and to keep the good. He did not require of them that they mention the negative. This view appears to me to be symptomatic of our present time. Those advocating tolerance would like to allow everything to stand as is. No more criticism. And above all no drawing of lines. Somebody expressed the current thinking in this way: Tolerate everything – except intolerance! Whoever reads the new testament carefully, however, will notice that both Jesus and the apostles often voiced criticism and drew lines (Mt. 16:11-12; Mt. 23; I Kor. 15:12; II Kor. 11:1-4; III Joh. 9-10; etc.).

#### **2. Examine in the light of the Word of God**

Recently I read the report of a well-known German leader. He had also been in the Willow Creek church. In summary he said: "I went to Chicago with typical German skepticism. But as I was exposed to this warm, friendly atmosphere, my heart was won." Naturally he came back filled with enthusiasm. Therefore my question: Are we still able to examine things biblically? Or have we been blinded by the amazing statistics of the supposedly largest church in the western world? Have we been overwhelmed by the extraordinary charisma an American baby-boomer in his mid-forties? Have we been taken captive by the gigantic advertising and marketing strategy of the Willow Creek production?

#### **3. No joy in revealing the faults of others**

I would like to emphasize something else at this point. I have no joy in revealing the faults and weaknesses of others. I would much rather close my report here. But for the simple reason that Willow Creek is bearing such a powerful influence on many churches all over the world<sup>8</sup>, perhaps greater than any single church in history, for that reason Bill Hybels and his concept of church must be examined in the light of the Holy Scriptures. We are dealing ultimately with the truths of the gospel and of New Testament church. Of course, one would likewise find faults and defects if one would examine carefully for instance the church in Mannheim, Edisonstrasse, to which I belong. Our church, however, has no worldwide influence. Nevertheless, I would be happy if someone would with genuine sincerity point out to me negative things in our church. Sincere admonition ultimately helps more than flattery. Our responsibility

<sup>6</sup> ibid p.269

<sup>7</sup> ibid p.70

<sup>8</sup> Bob Buford: "Willow Creek is the cue ball of the contemporary church movement. Their innovative approach has broken the mold. The impact of these innovations on the church around the world is incalculable." Source: <http://www.willowcreek.org> from 4/23/97

lies therein, to humbly speak the truth with the goal of helping. Suppressing the truth ultimately helps no one. Truth must remain truth, even when it speaks against us.

### These things concern me:

*"Yet he has no [firm] root in himself, but is [only] temporary, and when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he falls away." (Mat. 13:21)*

#### 1. The philosophy of pragmatism

It appears to me that Bill is Hybels a confirmed pragmatist. A pragmatist prefers that which works. The late Chinese statesman Deng Xiao Ping defined pragmatism once in an original way: "It makes no difference whether a cat is black or white. If it catches mice, it is a good cat!" Pragmatism therefore does not judge things according to overarching principles, but solely according to their functionality. Pragmatism deals in terms of fulfilling a purpose. The tendency towards pragmatism, particularly in the spiritual realm, has deep roots in the United States. The USA never really developed an independent theology in the strictest sense of the word. They adopted for the most part the fruits of the Reformation in England – but with a strong Calvinistic flavor. The love of freedom was combined with the love of Protestantism and pragmatism. In this context, therefore, the gospel will be accepted if it works.<sup>9</sup>

#### Pragmatism in Willow Creek

On the one hand in the preaching. Gregory Pritchard, who examined the content of the seeker-service sermons with scientific precision, came to the conclusion that Hybels constantly made use of theories from psychology and economic management.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, he plays heavily upon the felt needs of people. That is basically legitimate. But Hybels is in danger of proclaiming a "eudæmonistic gospel", i.e. a message, which would first of all meet the need for happiness in a person. Let us hear how Bill Hybels expresses this in his own words. After a summer break for study and reflection he returned with following thoughts:

I was still basking in the blessing of having just witnessed the baptism of nearly four hundred adults from this church on the last Sunday in June. But the basking came to an abrupt end when I asked myself the sobering question: "I wonder how many of those four hundred who were just baptized will still be faithfully following God, and growing in him, and bearing fruit for him upon my return in eight short weeks?" The honest answer were terribly painful for me to admit. Over the course of thirteen years in this church, thousands of people have proven to be rocky-soiled people, thorny-soiled people whose faith has faded.<sup>11</sup>

Those are honest words from Bill Hybels. Have the contents of his evangelistic sermons significantly changed since that time?<sup>12</sup> After more than 15 years experience in the ministry of the gospel I am aware of the difficult struggle of knowing how much truth concerning following Christ one should communicate to an unbeliever. One thing is clear: The "come to Jesus and you will be happy" message is a truncated gospel. Whoever only hears this type of sermon can hardly receive genuine life from God. One Willow Creek staff member put it this way: "This approach produces numbers, but no disciples!"<sup>13</sup>

On the other hand, pragmatism is practiced at Willow Creek. For instance, secular management experts were consulted in the beginning years, which helped the church develop a market oriented strategy. The theologian and church growth analyst Michael Blömer, who dealt in his doctoral dissertation with the Willow Creek church, comes to this conclusion: "In the USA church planting and church growth have been thoroughly studied. All different types of churches have been surveyed and examined and principles have been discovered which, if applied, will help churches grow. Basically Willow Creek church is the Top Church, which has applied these principles the best." Further comment is superfluous.<sup>14</sup> Then, there are women officially functioning as elders.<sup>15</sup> Women teach in church meetings, at which men are present. Program director Nancy Beach tells in an interview, how this came to be:

<sup>11</sup> *ibid* p.277

<sup>12</sup> Dr. Pritchard wrote to me in a letter of May 4, 1997 that he had repeatedly spoken with Bill Hybels concerning his paper. Unfortunately Hybels was not open to his arguments. By May of 1997 Pritchard had no knowledge of a change of course in Willow Creek.

<sup>13</sup> Pritchard, Gregory: Willow Creek Seeker Services, p.278

<sup>14</sup> Magazine: Neues Leben, Altenkirchen, No. 1/97, p.28

<sup>15</sup> Hybels, Lynne & Bill: *Ins Kino gegangen und Gott getroffen*, Projection J, Wiesbaden 1995, p.107 & 143

<sup>9</sup> An excellent definition and presentation of the current pragmatism is found in the preface of MacArthur, John: *Wenn Salz kraftlos wird* (Original title: "Ashamed of the Gospel"), CLV Bielefeld 1996, p.12-17

<sup>10</sup> Pritchard, Gregory: Willow Creek Seeker Services, *Evaluating a New Way of Doing Church*, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI 1996, p.278

The elders of the church worked through numerous books and commentaries. Ultimately they came to the conclusion that women could teach and lead.<sup>16</sup> In the same interview Nancy Beach confirms the prevailing pragmatism at Willow Creek:

“We can discuss theory forever, but in the end that which works, prevails.”

These and many other examples which have not been mentioned demonstrate that Willow Creek's pragmatism ultimately relativizes the statements of the holy scriptures. Christ and the apostles did not know of the philosophy of pragmatism. Pragmatism and superficiality go hand in hand.

## 2. “Worship services” for seekers

More than 50% of Americans today indicate that they belong to some Christian church and according to the surveys, 84% believe that Jesus Christ is the son of God. Despite the unmistakable impact of secularization, there is still a prevailing religious influence in the USA. The phenomenon of Willow Creek is therefore primarily a result of the numerous blessings of a plowed and fertilized ground. Roger Peugh, who worked for 20 years as a church planter in Germany and today is professor of Missions at Grace Seminary in Winona Lake, Indiana mentioned in a conversation that the different situation can be compared as follows: “In the USA 30% of the people are looking for God; in Germany there are perhaps 2-3%.”

Under these circumstances, is it not wise in the States to conduct church services for seekers? The pragmatist would answer in the affirmative. Whoever wishes to hold strictly to the instructions of the New Testament will be more reserved. According to the scriptures the coming together of the local church has as its purpose the worship of God, the edification of the believers and their equipping for service. Nowhere are we called upon to change the function of a worship service into an evangelistic meeting. In I Cor. 14:23 and in James 2:1ff we are told what could happen if. . . But we are not encouraged in these passages to reorient our program and our preaching to seekers. We have innumerable opportunities outside the worship services of the church to be involved in evangelism. Why then should we evangelize in the “worship service” and violate the basic New Testament principles? If we do it anyway, the driving force is no longer the holy scriptures but pragmatism. The well-known Bible teacher John MacArthur points out that after the death of An-

anias and Saphira great fear came over all who heard about it (Acts 5:11). He continues: “After verse 13 the unbelievers did not dare to join them. That stands in diametrical contradiction to the popular notion today of user friendliness. Instead of luring people in by giving them the feeling of being welcome and secure, God used fear in order to keep them out.”<sup>17</sup>

### Only an irregularity

The proponents of the Willow Creek model argue that the seeker service is simply an evangelistic meeting by a different name. The worship service takes place in the middle of the week. And in fact on Wednesday and Thursday evenings between three and four thousand Christians gather together in Chicago. I cannot, however, agree with this view. On the one hand it is still an undermining of the biblical concept of “worship service”. The New Testament describes the coming together of Christians as a gathering for believers. In such a meeting God is worshiped, the Christians are edified and equipped.<sup>18</sup>

On the other hand I fear that most churches in our country would exclusively evangelize on Sundays without caring for the necessary teaching of doctrine, edification and equipping. Once again pragmatism would contribute to a weakening of biblical church life. A church needs “healthy doctrine” for the strengthening of faith and for being firmly rooted in the Lord (Acts 2:42; 11:26; etc.).

### The problem of integration

Apart from the fact that the German situation cannot be equated with the American situation, there is something else that ought to be considered. Experts sound a unified warning by pointing to the fact that many people simply remain in the seeker service. Pritchard studied the Willow Creek church thoroughly. He arrived at the conclusion that the majority of the approx. 15,000 weekend visitors had already made a decision for Christ.<sup>19</sup> Do we remember the disproportion between visitors and church members? Evidently it is difficult for the staff members, despite all their polished strategies, to draw the people away from their visitor's mentality. Ed Dobson, who has adopted many elements of the Willow Creek model, con-

<sup>16</sup> Magazine: Praxis, booklet 1/97 No. 68, p.13

<sup>17</sup> MacArthur, John: Wenn Salz kraftlos wird (Original title: “Ashamed of the Gospel”), p.66

<sup>18</sup> Dr. Fruchtenbaum, Arnold in *Gemeindegründung*, KfG Rasdorf, No. 49, p.4-11

<sup>19</sup> WCCC Church Leaders Handbook New Expanded 1996 Edition, 3rd ed. p.275

cedes in his book "The open Church"<sup>20</sup>, that his evangelistic "Saturday Night" program has developed into a church within the existing Calvary Church (Grand Rapids, Michigan).<sup>21</sup> That is just about the last thing that we want to have.

### Evangelism using worldly means

A further question must be discussed at this point. Is it legitimate to draw people out of the "world" with "worldly" means? Why does it have to be Soft-Pop or Rock music?<sup>22</sup> Why must people be prepared for the sermon with theater? Why does the sermon have to be "worldly enough"?

The question must be asked, whether by these means the gospel is being taken into the world or the world is being brought into the church. I know very well that such thinking has become foreign for many Christians. But the church is God's holy nation (I Pet. 2:9). Lohfink calls it a "Society of Contrast".<sup>23</sup> The word of the cross sets boundaries between the church and the world. These may not be erased. However, that is exactly what pragmatism does. Evangelism can be carried out outside the church, for example through Bible studies, evangelistic house groups, lectures, etc. If people are first brought into the church after they have become believers, some problems will automatically be solved. The "worship service" on Sunday (or whenever it takes place) can continue to serve its biblical purpose. Popular music, theater, pantomime, exaggerated visual media and other questionable elements can be left outside the door. I would like plead for this model.<sup>24</sup>

### 3. Dearth of biblical teaching

A further consequence of the aforementioned pragmatism is an evident lack of biblical teaching. On the weekends the seekers have center stage. The Christians meet on Wednesday and Thursday evenings for "New Community Worship Services". This would be the obvious context for the instruc-

tion of the believer. However, over the past seven years a mere half dozen biblical books have been dealt with.<sup>25</sup> Eighty percent of the evenings revolve around particular themes. That indicates an evident lack of systematic biblical instruction. Dr. Gregory Pritchard bemoans the lack of biblical teaching on the whole. He maintains that among 180 full-time staff members there is only a handful of teachers with biblical training.<sup>26</sup> For a huge church like Willow Creek that is much too few. Of course there is a large offering of seminars. But biblical teaching which is grounded firmly in the scriptures is rarely provided for the believer. In its place secular psychology plays an even more dominant role.<sup>27</sup>

Pritchard's study corresponds fully with my personal observations. My friends and I participated in a small group for married couples. I learned that the majority of the people present had not been saved through the ministry of the Willow Creek church. Upon being asked why they left their former churches, the response repeatedly was: "too legalistic"! Then we had the Bible study. The text was John 2:1-12, the wedding feast at Cana of Galilee. That is really not a difficult passage. But the output was extremely meager. The leader was not especially well prepared. Perhaps he had a bad day. But the contributions of the other participants were for the most part quite shallow. It was so obvious. The depth was lacking. The firm foundation of God's inexhaustible word was missing.

In the church book store there is a large selection of Christian literature. Evangelistic books and publications of the Willow Creek church are available in large numbers. Upon closer examination it becomes apparent that books concerning spiritual growth, a deeper understanding of the Bible and sanctification are almost completely missing. Book tables and book stores reflect in a certain way the spiritual life of a church. Why hardly any valuable biographies? Why almost no literature to aid in deepening one's spiritual life? Why so little literature relating to sanctification? Pritchard gives the following answer:

"Themes, books and disciplines which are useful to the general concept of Willow Creek, are given wide distribution. Those outside the general concept are refused."<sup>28</sup> It is my sincere belief that the Willow Creek church, despite much that is ex-

<sup>20</sup> Dobson, Ed: Der offene Gottesdienst, Projection J, Wiesbaden 1996, p.119 (Original title: Starting a Seeker sensitive service, Zondervan Publishing House, Grand rapid, MI 1993)

<sup>21</sup> Recommended in the WCCC Church Leaders Handbook New Expanded 1996 Edition, 3rd ed. p.93.

<sup>22</sup> Dobson, Ed: Der offene Gottesdienst, Projection J, Wiesbaden 1996, p.50

<sup>23</sup> Lohfink, G.: Wie hat Jesus Gemeinde gewollt?, Herder Verlag 1993, p.143f quoted by Wetzel, Gabi: Die Spannung zwischen bedürfnisorientierter und bibelorientierter Gemeinde (unpublished paper at the FTA, Gießen)

<sup>24</sup> Nowhere in the letters to the seven churches does the Lord Jesus Christ cite a lack in reaching out to seekers, however, he does criticize lack of discernment and worldliness.

<sup>25</sup> Source: [http://www.willowcreek.org/new\\_community\\_series\\_from\\_4/28/97](http://www.willowcreek.org/new_community_series_from_4/28/97)

<sup>26</sup> Pritchard, Gregory: Willow Creek Seeker Services, p.274 & 285

<sup>27</sup> Pritchard, Gregory: Willow Creek Seeker Services, p.223 (The Quagmire of Psychology)

<sup>28</sup> ibid p.280

emplary, is as a whole too shallow. And yet the following questions arise immediately: Do we ourselves have greater depth? Are our churches established more firmly? May God give us that which we need to build according to biblical principles!

Something has given me hope. Lynne and Bill Hybels wrote in 1995 in their history of Willow Creek: "In the early years of Willow Creek we did not yet have many Christians, and so we used the lion's share of our resources for the first part of the great commission. As we experienced some conversions, we shifted our resources gradually in order to provide the necessary balance. Today the emphasis lies more on discipleship than on evangelism because so many Christians need support and training."<sup>29</sup>

#### 4. Pseudocharismatic openness

Just a few months before the founding of the church in August of 1975 Hybels read the book by Robert Schuller "Your Church Has Real Possibilities"<sup>30</sup>. Subsequently he visited his seminar on "Successful Church Leadership" in California.<sup>31</sup> Schuller is considered to be the "most successful" T.V. preacher of all times. He has succeeded as no other before or since in spreading the philosophy of positive thinking among evangelicals.<sup>32</sup>

Another questionable figure who has influenced Hybels in his worship practices is Jack Hayford, a leader on the charismatic scene.<sup>33</sup> Bill Hybels is surely no "full charismatic", but at least half. His understanding of worship and the practice in the mid-week church services give the impression of a moderate charismatic church. Also, the training materials "Serving in Harmony with Tendencies, Strengths and Talents" (S.H.T.S.T.) contain pseudo charismatic thinking. For example the sign gifts and gifts of revelation such as prophecy, tongues and miracles are considered to be valid gifts for today. Because of these views the door to further pseudo charismatic influences has been opened.

<sup>29</sup> Hybels, Lynne & Bill: *Ins Kino gegangen und Gott getroffen*, Projection J, Wiesbaden 1995, p.249

<sup>30</sup> WCCC Church Leaders Handbook New Expanded 1996 Edition, 3rd ed. p.48

<sup>31</sup> Pritchard, Gregory: *Willow Creek Seeker Services*, p.49

<sup>32</sup> Bühne, Wolfgang: *Spiel mit dem Feuer*, CLV Bielefeld, 2nd ed. 1991, p.132

<sup>33</sup> Hybels, Bill & Zander, Dieter: *Defining Moments, The Willow Creek Audio Journal For Church Leaders, Connecting People To God Through Worship*, Zondervan Publishing House 1996

#### 5. The "ecumenical" philosophy

Where no lines are drawn to guard against pseudo charismatic influences, there is also almost always openness to Catholicism and to virtually all other current philosophies. Hybels had, for example, a catholic priest from the neighborhood speak to his church. His theme was: "What Protestants can learn from Catholics." Hybels asked the priest whether he was born again. His answer: "We were born and have grown up but I think we must repeatedly be born and born again. Not only once, but again and again." Although staff members called upon him repeatedly to correct the wrong statements, senior pastor Hybels allowed them to remain unchallenged.<sup>34</sup>

#### The Willow Creek Association

A few years ago the Willow Creek Association was founded. This worldwide association now includes more than 2200 churches representing over 70 different Denominations!<sup>35</sup> It is obvious that doctrinal differences must be pushed to the background. The decisive and uniting element is that a church builds itself according to the model of the Willow Creek church. The spectrum in the USA extends from original Pentecostal churches (Assemblies of God) to Seventh Day Adventist to the half liberal Reformed Church.<sup>36</sup> That is pragmatic pluralism.

#### Willow Creek and the Promise Keepers

The Willow Creek church officially supports the Promise Keepers movement. This new men's movement after just a few years already has two million members in the USA. One of the seven promises which each man must make requires working to overcome all denominational divisions. Truths for which our forefathers sacrificed in some cases their very lives are now being neutralized in the wake of a new ecumenical unity. The men of the Willow Creek church are encouraged to attend the large Promise Keepers rallies.<sup>37</sup>

#### Interdenominational congresses

Bill Hybels spoke in 1993 at the congress in Nuremberg which was organized predominantly by charismatic groups. He spoke in 1995 at the German Protestant national conference (DEKT) in Hamburg. The leadership of the large Hamburg conference in November of 1996 was more evan-

<sup>34</sup> WCCC Church Leaders Handbook New Expanded 1996 Edition, 3rd ed. p.274

<sup>35</sup> <http://www.willowcreek.org> from 4/23/97

<sup>36</sup> WCCC Church Leaders Handbook p.35

<sup>37</sup> *ibid* p.206

gical in its make-up.<sup>38</sup> There is method behind all this. Hybels clearly sees himself as a key player in reconciling charismatic and non-charismatic evangelicals. For that reason no lines are drawn in any direction.

## Summary and conclusion

Mixed signals are being sent out from Willow Creek. I have no doubt that the Lord is at work in this church. Innumerable churches around the world have gotten a new view for the urgency of evangelism through Bill Hybels and his co-workers. In this way Willow Creek is really exemplary. But concerning the methods which affect evangelism and church planting, the church is in my opinion too shallow. I would have to even call some things unbiblical. In Willow Creek the division between the church and the world is not clear enough. Observing it as a phenomenon, everything is very impressive, gleaming, attractive. Those who examine more carefully receive a more varied impression. Much is simply too shallow, depth in the Scriptures is not found. Willow Creek exports both, the excellent and the shallow. May God grant that we can distinguish between the two!

For that reason proponents of the Willow Creek concept must allow themselves to be asked whether they have taken the trouble to search out the sources of Hybels' theories and principles? If they have analyzed the contents of his preaching thoroughly? If they have examined how many in Willow Creek have truly become Christians, disciples and co-workers? And if they have realized how much pragmatism, how much philosophy, psychology and how much modern management thinking makes up the foundation of the church. I cannot shake the feeling that the fascination with large numbers is stronger than attempts at critical thinking. For that reason not a few Christians and churches have been drawn into this new wave. The attitude "If it's big, it's good" is not biblical. I fear that the popularity of some churches has been paid for with many ungodly compromises.

In general I share the conclusions of Wolfgang Bühne: "My great concern is that we evangelicals repeatedly succumb to the danger of expecting a revival through new methods, techniques, programs and personalities, instead of turning to the Lord and his word, humbling ourselves before him and committing ourselves to him in new obedience."<sup>39</sup> I have nothing against the man Bill Hybels. On the contrary. I find him very appealing.

But my concerns revolve around the issues at hand and their impact on the church of Jesus Christ in our country. In Willow Creek the division between the church and the world is not drawn clearly enough. It is possible to be at one and the same time Christian and worldly. In this way the message of the cross is being neutralized. Christianity is made "acceptable". The salt becomes tasteless.

One more thing. I am convinced that the rise of each questionable or wrong movement can be traced back to a "vitamin deficiency" in the church of Jesus. What is missing in the body of Christ? Is there not a general lack of the terror of God's holiness, repentance of lukewarmness and compromises with sin, clear rejection of a materialistic lifestyle, as well as the loyalty to Christ and his word? Is there not a general lack of authentic Christianity in the power of the Holy spirit? Is there not a general lack of Spirit filled believers and biblically grounded churches in our country? Before we check off the subject "Willow Creek" too quickly, we should adopt the positive and see the negative as a challenge and reason to question ourselves. Is my personal life committed fully to Jesus Christ? Does the Christian group to which we belong really have the desire to be and always more and more to become a church according to the New Testament? Does the love of Christ burn in us as well as the love for the lost? If not, then we can learn something from Willow Creek.

*"As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, [so] walk in Him, having been firmly rooted [and now] being built up in Him and established in your faith, just as you were instructed, [and] overflowing with gratitude."* Colossians 2:6-7

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<sup>38</sup> Materialdienst der EZW 1/97, p.26

<sup>39</sup> Bühne, Wolfgang: in "fest und treu", Meinerzhagen, No. 3/96, p.16