

THE CHURCH IN THE 21ST CENTURY:
A CASE STUDY IN RHETORICAL ADAPTATION

By

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INTRODUCTION

A product lacks marketability if a need for that product fails to exist. Prior to the 1980's, the American people did not consider personal computers a necessity. Due to lack of vision, large companies, such as IBM, allowed young entrepreneurs to develop this innovative technology without competition. As a result, these entrepreneurs - mainly Steve Jobs (Apple) and Bill Gates (Microsoft) – carved out an unadulterated niche for themselves. On his road to success, Bill Gates has stressed the importance of creating a need and then providing a vehicle to fulfill that need. Currently, the wealthiest man in the world to date, Bill Gates, realized early on in his career that success rested not in the product itself, but satisfying people's needs – real or manufactured.

Over time, these needs fluctuate according to the desires of the population. Similar needs are linked together and become validated by society. Berger suggests our society is laced with linked needs or “plausibility structures”¹ (Berger and Luckmann 154-155) that underpin our actions. In other words, these structures guide people toward determining what is or is not credible. For example, in the past, plausibility structures (or broad social consensus/norms) have had minimal effect on the modern church, but Peter Berger believes that has changed. Berger, in *The Sacred Canopy*, suggests that the church is among those institutions now competing for the allegiance of its human constituency because, in its current form, it often lacks effectiveness. The church, as with

¹ Berger and Luckmann define “plausibility structures” as “certain socially validated, continually fluctuating infrastructures”(154-155). For instance, in the 1950's, Marilyn Monroe's size and shape served as the benchmark for the American “beauty.” Today, the American “beauty” often resembles a young woman in her late teens and significantly more petite than Ms. Monroe. The legalization of abortion demonstrates another shift in thinking that proves more politically charged.

all institutions, in order to survive, must align itself with these fluctuating plausibility structures. This alignment positions the organization to present itself in such a way that stimulates a desire for “consumers” to “buy” as is evidenced by the fact that “many mainline denominations are trying to lift sagging membership rolls with contemporary services, even as worshipers pass them by to attend charismatic megachurches”(Rainey 7). George Barna, a demographic and marketing research guru, reiterates this premise:

Yet, as we prepare to enter into a new century of ministry, we must address one inescapable conclusion: Despite the activity and chutzpah emanating from thousands of congregations, the Church in America is losing influence and adherents faster than any other major institution in the nation. Unless a radical solution for the revival of the Christian Church in the United States is adopted and implemented soon, the spiritual hunger of Americans will either go unmet or be satisfied by other faith groups (1).

John Stott, a prominent theologian, when discussing his book Basic Christianity says that today’s pastor “would have to begin with a more basic Christian message and present it in competition with other religions and philosophies”(Anderson 134). All three of these individuals stress that the church is in fact an organization that must compete for its survival.

Bill Hybels, a vibrant youth minister, sensed this trend earlier than most and decided to transform his thoughts into action. In hopes of finding out why church

attendance had been declining, Hybels and a handful of Son City workers² went door to door in Palatine, IL, a suburb of Chicago. Sorting through their interviews, they came up with a blanket answer that seemed to encapsulate the majority of reasons why people chose not to attend church: “If the messages are irrelevant and the services are lifeless, boring, and predictable, and if every week I leave feeling more beat up than when I arrived, how can anybody expect me to be excited about supporting the church financially?”(Hybels and Hybels 58). With these thoughts in mind, the young enthusiastic Christians decided to “be” the church. This band of twenty-year olds was propelled by a sincere desire to convey the Gospel in a manner which would appeal to the “unchurched.”

These men and women chose an audience – those not attending church - listened to the needs of those individuals, identified and defined the exigence³, and then created a product to meet their constituents’ needs. Over the years their product has adapted as the needs of the constituents have multiplied. In addition, they have implemented numerous conferences⁴ and Leadership Summits⁵ to aid other churches as well providing a vast amount of resources for others⁶.

² “Though Son City lifted fun and games to new levels of hilarity, there was never any doubt about the ultimate goal – to compellingly present biblical truths to lost high school kids”(Hybels & Hybels 36). Son City was essentially a vibrant youth group.

³ Bitzer defines exigence as “an imperfection marked by urgency...a defect, an obstacle,...a thing that is other than it should be” (43). In this case, exigence refers to the reasons why individuals chose not to attend to church.

⁴ Church Leadership Conferences help church leaders find new ways to fulfill and expand their ministries.

⁵ Leadership Summits are designed to increase the leadership effectiveness of church leaders.

⁶ For instance, the Willow Creek Association (WCA) was created to assist churches in recruiting key staff or ministry positions, but primarily to augment ministry resources in areas of leadership, evangelism, spiritual gifts, small groups, and contemporary music.

Due to their initiatives, support, and “cutting edge” mentality, Willow Creek is viewed by many as the church of tomorrow. Berger and Luckmann suggest that plausibility alignment is a “linguistic exercise for the modern institution”(McMillan 330), and that institutions must legitimize themselves both externally and internally to their constituencies through their language (61). Thus, this paper will analyze how Willow Creek Community Church is positioning itself to lead the church into the twenty-first century, especially how it is “speaking” a message which modern day individuals find compelling. As McMillan notes:

Words become the unit of analysis, and institutional power becomes rhetorical power. If Donald Bryant is correct in calling rhetoric the process of adjusting ideas to people and people to ideas, then it is the religious group which most successfully ‘adjusts’ itself and its position that should possess the competitive edge in the institutional competition for recruits, resources, and allegiance (330-331).

Thus the paradox emerges for today’s church. Do churches fall in line with Berger’s argument and align or adapt their message to appeal to their constituencies or do they cling to the Biblical imperative? What does Willow Creek do? As a rhetorician, Hybels’ sermons will serve as the primary source to discern how he and Willow Creek seek to achieve alignment with their culture and to keep faithful to their Call at the same time.

The review of literature which follows examines the current state of the contemporary church and the importance of aligning its message with the resonating plausibility structures; the various factors that influence our culture and in turn our

plausibility structures, and the pastor in our case study and the methods by which I analyzed his sermons.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Contemporary State of the Church

Today, a plethora of neighborhood churches exist, but most operate in a state of denial, lack of insight, or simply choose not to acknowledge their misalignment with modern thought and practice. In other words, they are failing to address their constituent's needs in a credible fashion as argued by Berger, Barna, Stott and others. Apparently, larger churches often appear more credible than smaller churches, as is evidenced by over half of the constituents worshipping in the larger churches which only comprise 14% of the total population of churches (Anderson 50). In the past, a large church did not exceed one thousand members. In contrast, today's large churches consist of thousands of members, multiple pastors, and an extensive support staff. The average service last sixty-minutes (sermon 27 minutes), and people are "reached through small groups, discovery classes [discussion on spiritual matters], affinity evangelism, counseling, and a variety of constantly changing approaches" (Anderson 14).

While there may no longer be a "typical" church, churches today generally fall into one of the three categories: small church (less than one hundred – serving surrounding community), middle of the road (two to four hundred – seeking numerical growth), and megachurch (over one thousand members – offering a wide variety of programs to meet many needs) (Barna 15-17). In recent years, the media has focused primarily on the emergence on the megachurch, such as Willow Creek.

In a similar fashion, leadership in churches has also undergone a transformation. Previously, the pastor preaching the Word of God served as the cornerstone for

leadership in most churches and “leaders [were] not critical to the health of the Church” (Barna 102). Pastors believed that “as long as we preach the Word of God and commit ourselves to living in faith, He [God] will take care of us” (Barna 102). Over the past few decades, however, many churches have begun to stress the Biblical concept of spiritual gifts, suggesting that God entrusts every believer with at least one spiritual gift to use in service of the Body of Christ. Among the gifts, no one gift is more important than the other because each gift plays a critical role in producing a healthy church. This concept is crucial to understand because it promotes a decentralization of power. Pastors, although still revered, are now “called by God to lead and possess virtuous character and effectively motivate, mobilize resources, and direct people toward the fulfillment of a jointly embraced vision from God” (Barna 107). Visions, for the most part, are carried out by the laity. Thus, the senior pastor’s role has shifted so that vision casting, inspiring others, and managing people holds greater priority in his/her days than in previous generations.

Nowadays, pastors not only are expected to preach but also to envision, to create community, to organize, to equip others, to plan effectively, to visit the sick, to celebrate, and to relate to everyone (Jackson 8). Such widespread demands on a pastor seem oppressive, almost insurmountable:

While America has become the land of niche market and the home of the specialist, churches are placing excessive demands upon pastors, the ministry specialists. Protestant pastors work an average of nearly sixty-five hours per

week, juggling sixteen major dimensions of activity. This torturous pace has made burnout commonplace (Barna 5).

Pastors feel called, whether by God, by their elders, or more directly their constituents to stay involved in every area of their congregation.

To help offset the excessive demands on pastors, recently most churches have shifted to a multiple pastor staff. The rule of thumb in the Christian church is one pastor for every one hundred fifty people (Anderson 55), and today as churches continue to grow, so do the responsibilities of the senior pastor. Heightened expectations from churches, in turn, move senior pastors to expect more from their paid as well as volunteer staff. Also, historically, women consumed the majority of the volunteer hours, not only in the church but also in the community, but not so in contemporary churches. The last decade marked the first time in history that the majority of women returned to work within a year after having a child, signifying women's increased dedication to their careers (Anderson 30). With more women in the workforce, the amount of readily available traditional volunteers necessarily declines. Thus, tomorrow's pastor must understand how to influence and motivate individuals toward action and perhaps, adjust to the decreasing volunteer population as well.

The church is changing, not only in size, styles of leadership, and volunteer base, but also, in the nature of the constituents themselves. The majority of churches fail to adjust adequately to the cultural changes within American society; this, says Berger and others must change. In order to encourage constituents to "buy" their message, churches must realign themselves with the ever-fluctuating plausibility structures, which underpin

society. To be “successful” in the next century, churches must continually keep their pulse on what society deems credible and formulate their messages accordingly.

Identifying the needs, desires, and longings of the churches’ constituents, who are ever changing themselves, is no longer optional; it’s a necessity.

Cultural Trends

Changes in America’s culture also account for the face-lift in today’s churches. The cultural changes over the last few decades are staggering, and as a result, today’s church members and prospective church members look, act, and think very differently from previous decades. In order to understand this shift more fully and how it affects the modern church, it is necessary to look at some major factors which have influenced our culture, in particular, the effects of mass media, consumerism, and changing demographics.

The Effects of Mass Media - Due to improvements in technology, no longer are the events in Kuala Lumpur foreign to Americans. The once distant idea of the world as a global village has quickly become a reality, as is evidenced by nearly instantaneous communication and increasing access. The mysteries of the world are no longer such mysteries. In addition, unlike previous generations, today’s youth “have grown up under the tutelage of video games, MTV, computers, videos, CD-ROMs, the Internet, and other emerging media”(Barna 3). In his research, George Barna found that the average teenager spends seven of their seventeen waking hours in receiving input from the media, and yet, most churches fail to integrate technology into their services (64). Those that do must defend their stance. For instance, First Assembly of God in Winston-Salem (a

megachurch of four thousand members) believe their primary objective is to reach the lost, and their pastor stresses that “living in a media-based society, we see it only right and fitting for the church to use the resources it has for teaching, for visual representation of the life of Christ. In no way does it water down the message. In fact, I believe it enhances the message”(Rainey 7).

Today’s audience needs to be addressed differently, because the media plays a prominent role in dictating consumer’s expectations. For example, the mediated mind is one of instantaneous gratification, adapted to seeing results more quickly than in the past. Pastors face a new challenge of making every sermon stand alone (much like a thirty minute sitcom) since church-goers are less likely to return to the same church in subsequent Sundays unless their expectations are met on their first visit. Supporting the sitcom flavor of some contemporary services, Postman argues that religion “can be made entertaining,” but “by doing so, do we destroy it as an ‘authentic object of culture?’”(124). That is one question facing the church in the next century: How do we appropriately mediate our message while at the same time remaining true to our Call?

Consumerism - With the advent of technology, consumer expectations of organizations, even the church, continue to soar. Technology encourages Americans to strive for the “latest and greatest,” while at the same time promoting a “lack of loyalty and commitment to individuals, ideas, and institutions”(Barna 63). Individuals’ desires to climb aboard the newest sensation outweigh their tendencies to plant stakes and invest for the long haul. This pervasive way of thinking carries over into the church. Bellah suggests:

Religion has been invaded by the market mentality, so that it has become in many instances another consumer good. ‘Consumer Christians’ shop for the church that is most convenient for their needs and switch, as casually as they change brands of dishwasher detergent, if they think can get a better package deal elsewhere (183).

A “better package” is quickly becoming a full service church “that can offer quality and variety in music, extensive youth programs, diverse educational opportunities, a counseling staff, support groups, singles’ ministry, athletic activities, multiple Sunday morning services, a modern nursery, and the other services and programs only available in larger churches” (Anderson 51).

In the past, churches were seen as “destinations:” “When you found the church you wanted to join, you stayed with it through the good and bad times” (Anderson 27), but that no longer remains the case. In recent years, in hopes of resonating to the needs of fickle Americans, there has been a shift toward one-day seminars, special task force assignments, and stand-alone sermons (Anderson 36). Church loyalty no longer remains

the norm, and so pastors, through their words, face the challenge of persuading individuals to not only attend but to commit.

Today's American is a consumer, where "religion is no longer a matter of necessity; it is a matter of preference" (Bruce 46). This statement begs the question how does a "consumer" choose one church over another? Time and again, today's consumer chooses a church due to its pastor and refers to his/her church by his/her pastor's name (e.g., Campolo's church). In the past, a pastor was a revered person in the community and often served as the moral compass on community decisions, but "time has changed the way people view pastors. The average preacher today is not going to make it on the basis of dignity of his position" (Hybels, Briscoe, and Robinson 19). Today people demand more. Today's pastors are "expected to be informed, articulate, and charismatic. They are to be as attractive and well-groomed as the anchorman on the network news, and they are expected to relate to the peculiarities of the community. They are to attract people, raise money, and expand programs" (Anderson 54).

On the upside, rampant consumerism is also forcing the church to act fiscally and organizationally responsible. In the 1980's megachurches' budgets began to skyrocket, matching those of major corporations and forcing churches to question how they were managing their funds. For example, Willow Creek experienced exponential growth in a short ten year period. From 1979 to 1989 their "Fund Balance" rose from \$1,872,834 to \$23,198,725 (Mellado 18). As the finances grow in these churches, so does the power of the microscope through which others view them.

In addition, churches across the country are flocking to management gurus to help lead their congregations more like businesses. For example, in the early nineties, Bob Buford established the Leadership Network for the sole purpose of looking at the ever-changing church in the twenty-first century and its unique “emphasis on entrepreneurial leadership and management skills successful in large businesses”(Chandler 47). Over the years Buford has brought in speakers such as Peter Drucker -- a management maven, Max DePree -- a fortune 500 executive and well-known example of a proven leader, and William Bridges -- a human development consultant.

The lines that once separated the church from the marketplace are growing dim. One dominant plausibility structure screams that the church is a business and businesses must be solvent in order to survive. If the church wishes to compete in this marketplace, it must align itself, especially its rhetoric, with this structure and change itself accordingly.

Changing Demographics - When demographics fluctuate dramatically, it follows that the tenets that underpin social philosophy and action will gyrate wildly as well. Changes in the population will mean changes in the ideas which “people find credible” (Berger, Rumor 34). Barna suggests that “understanding demographic trends can permit a church to increase its responsiveness to the emerging needs and expectations of the community it seeks to serve”(52); this is so because this understanding allows the church to adapt its message to members and potential recruits. In looking at the modern church, the following demographic trends are among the most influential: family, intergenerational breadth, wealth, education, and ethnic diversity.

Family Unit - The nucleus of the family has changed dramatically; the following facts speak for themselves:

- One out of every four marriages has ended in a divorce
- One-third of all married adults believe that adultery is an acceptable behavior
- One out of three children born this year will be born to an unwed mother

(Barna 66)

The facts suggest a profound change in the prototypical family unit. In recent years, the definition of “family” has shifted from people related by birth, adoption, or marriage to “people whom we care about very deeply, or who deeply care about us”(Barna 66). On the surface such a definition sounds harmless, but the underlying tones imply that nothing is constant – everything is malleable. Pastors are no longer able to assume that everyone is coming from more or less the same background. In addition, pastors face the daunting challenge of teaching about the importance of the traditional family when the majority of their constituents may not have been raised in a traditional family or are currently associated with a traditional family. Imagine discussing the importance of abstinence to a mother of three illegitimate children or the necessity for fidelity to a two-time adulterer. Pastors must walk a delicate tight rope.

Intergenerational Breadth - Another major challenge for churches remains the struggle for their pastors to speak in a language fluent to all the generations represented. According to Barna, “we have five significant generations in America today. The names of those segments, from oldest to youngest, are Seniors, Builders, Boomers, Busters, and

Mosaics⁷. Each segment possesses a unique set of identity factors and global perspectives”(71). As a large percentage of the population, the aging baby boomer generation must be addressed directly. According to Harvard Business School’s Advanced Management Program, the baby boomers, unlike previous generations, are motivated by experiences, jobs they enjoy, change versus stability, and candor over tact (Anderson 93). Typically, baby boomers like a challenge and might be expected to be drawn to churches that have high expectations of their members. Each generation embodies different desires, goals, and level of commitment to traditional plausibility structures. Adapting to each segment and yet maintaining a consistent plausible message proves a daunting task for the church in the twenty-first century.

Wealth - As the stock market continues to soar, the chasm between the rich and the poor in America continues to widen which also complicates the church’s public stance. Currently, America has more wealthy individuals (at least one million dollars) than any other nation, including Bill Gates whose estimated net worth ranks higher than most nations’ gross national products. Studies show that these wealthy individuals contain a disproportionate amount of the nation’s wealth, implying that millions of Americans are living in poverty and “the government-sponsored safety net for the poor is

⁷ *Seniors*: Born in 1926 and earlier (smallest percentage of the population). *Builders*: Born in 1927-1945. Lives are characterized by longevity, from spouse to long distance company because “familiarity and predictability bring them a sense of comfort and success”(Barna 82). Through the years have watched the church redefine success, from building a community to growth (Barna 84). *Boomers*: Born in 1946-1964. *Busters*: Born in 1965-1983. Most Busters reject “the uniqueness of Christianity, the existence of absolute moral truth, and the authority of the Bible, there are virtually no restrictions left in place to limit or guide their thinking about proper personal or corporate spiritual development”(Barna 71). This generation has experienced much hypocrisy and as a result seeks genuineness. One buster explains the popularity of the Internet by the following slogan WYSIWYG – What you see is what you get (Barna 77). *Mosaics*: Born in 1984-2002. The Mosaic generation is still in its formative stage (beliefs, values, lifestyles), but has been coined “mosaic” due to their thinking style and “fragmented nature” of experiences (Barna 214).

gradually being removed, leaving the poor to fend for themselves. Amazingly, growing numbers of Americans are exhibiting a hardened heart toward the plight of the less fortunate”(Barna 54). Through their rhetoric, pastors must guide their constituents’ to a Biblical understanding of their own sense of stewardship and of their responsibility given the fiscal disparity between the affluent and the poverty-stricken. In other words, pastors must lead congregates in considering such practical questions as: How should I be a steward of my own resources? How much should I give away? How much should I invest? What does the Christian gospel require of me and my money?

Education - Despite numerous efforts by non-profit organizations, America still has an astoundingly high illiteracy rate. Only half of all Americans are able to read at an eighth-grade level (Barna 56). As one might imagine, these figures cause churches to rethink how they choose to communicate with their constituencies; traditional forms of communication (e.g. printed media) might not necessarily be the most effective way any longer. Without compromising God’s Word, Barna suggests “the communication media, styles, and strategies used to convey God’s message to His people must change over the course of time because culture and context are constantly changing”(57).

In addition, from 1994 to 1996, public elementary and secondary schools’ internet access virtually doubled from 35% to 68%, respectively (Statistical Abstract of the US). This dramatic rise in interactive technology affects American children in a few significant ways. First, children today receive less human interaction in the classroom. As a result students’ “Soft skills”, such as “listening, conflict-resolution, negotiating, team building, and creative problem solving” are underdeveloped (Barna 55). Second, due to effects

from mass media (including the Internet), children's attention spans are getting shorter – teens average six to eight minutes (Barna 56). Shortened attention spans affect the church dramatically because more so than ever before, most children lack the attention spans to listen to lectures (i.e. a sermon) and as a result learn more by watching others. This is a particularly challenging obstacle for churches, because it raises the bar for the educational practice of the whole congregation, not just the pastor.

Ethnic Diversity - The United States of America traditionally celebrates numerous ethnic groups (melting pot) and various ways of thinking (free expression), yet Barna argues that “the failure to orchestrate a comfortable blend of relationships, behaviors, and opportunities among these groups has resulted in a certain amount of cultural dissipation”(51). Churches still testify to Dr. Martin Luther King's proclamation that Sunday morning is the most segregated hour during the week. Today, African-American, Hispanic, and the Asian Population are experiencing double-digit expansion population growth, while the Caucasian population remains at zero, and yet churches remain extremely segregated (Barna 2). If these statistics endure through the next few decades, the cultural make-up of the American society will change significantly. As a result, tomorrow's congregation will reflect these changes. The church will have a new audience and must implement measures to embrace this new audience.

Each ethnic group comes from different backgrounds and thus views the world through a different set of lenses. These various lenses manifest themselves in numerous forms, all the way from differing worship styles to the preferred type of Christian education. Despite the numeric growth of various ethnic groups, as stated above,

churches remain segregated. The successful church of tomorrow must radically seek to diversify its constituency.

Times have changed, constituents have changed and so have the demands placed on today's pastors. Pastors are no longer viewed one-dimensionally. The various dimensions are directly correlated with the cultural changes in America. The disintegration of traditional family values, incorporating a broad spectrum of generations into the church body, the widening of the affluence gap, an extremely high illiteracy rate, and shifting ethnic trends comprise new dimensions previously not seen in society. In order for churches to survive in the next century, these challenges must be overcome.

From my research, the effects of mass media, consumerism mentality, and changing demographics emerge as the driving cultural changes to which today's church must be responsive. These and other challenges will influence most churches in the next century. This is also the environment that Bill Hybels attempts to navigate. Today's congregation is highly influenced by the media, is driven by a "what is best for me" mentality, and possesses a cultural make-up that is varied and heterogeneous. In addition, with the dominant emergence of women in the workforce, pastors no longer have an endless chasm of readily accessible and willing volunteers. In order to serve successfully, pastors' speech must address today's congregation in a language which they understand and pastors must "run" their churches in accord with a new business imperative, and the cultural changes that accompany it.

CASE STUDY

Over the past four hundred years “every successful movement or revolution that has taken place...has had a strong visionary leader pointing the way”(Barna 104). In the past decade, a handful of leaders have supplied the world with a foreshadowing of who tomorrow’s pastor may resemble. The following passage illustrates one such leader, Bill Hybels:

In the spring of 1978, Bill rented a conference room in a local Howard Johnson and called the entire part-time and full-time staff together. “We’re falling apart,” he said. “We’re spinning off in too many different directions. We need a staff reporting structure. We can have any structure we all agree on, but there has to be somebody riding point. There has to be a designated leader.” He suggested they choose the person according to giftedness. “Who has the strongest leadership gifts?” he asked. Silence. “Well, I think I do.” (Hybels and Hybels 75).

Inching towards the turn of the century, Bill Hybels remains the senior pastor (over 50 staff pastors) of Willow Creek Community Church. Over 15,000 individuals regularly attend Willow Creek Community Church and almost 2000 churches are members of the Willow Creek Association—an association which helps churches better relate God’s solutions to the needs of seekers and believers through numerous resources (Burnett). Facilities include a 320,000 square feet multi-purpose building, sanctuary where 5,000 to 6,000 may gather to worship, and a 141-acre campus. Willow Creek defines their church as “an independent, interdenominational Christian church that responds to seekers, those

investigating spiritual truths in its community, throughout the United States, and around the world”(Willow Creek Community Church).

His wife states, “to say Bill caught the vision is inaccurate. The real truth is that the vision caught him”(Hybels and Hybels 48). The vision is best illustrated by stating Willow Creek’s purpose statement: “We want to turn irreligious people into fully devoted followers of Christ” (Hybels and Hybels 169). That vision left him with an extremely large congregation to shepherd. Over the years, Hybels has learned as a senior pastor he must assume many roles. With a congregation so large, no role holds greater importance than his ability to manage, encourage, and inspire those who work most closely to him.

The size of the congregation is due, in part, to the various services offered at Willow Creek. The two largest services are divided among his members: those that attend the believer service and those that attend the seeker service. As a result, these two services pose an inherent structural challenge that Hybels must overcome. Willow Creeks’ mission statement is as follows: “We want to turn irreligious people into fully devoted followers of Christ” (Hybels and Hybels 169). The seeker service is designed to reach the “irreligious people” whereas the believer service focuses on the tail end of their mission statement in order to help others become “fully devoted followers of Christ.”

How does Hybels align his messages for so many people with varied needs and ways of processing the world? Does he do so effectively? How does he juggle serving as the spiritual navigator as well as the executive of this huge church? How is he preparing his church for the twenty-first century? What do Hybels messages tell us about

rhetorical adaptability which Berger and others say will be critical to the church in the 21st Century?

METHODOLOGY

Having established rhetoric as one of the chief tools in plausibility alignment, I analyzed Hybels' sermons to determine if and how he achieves alignment with his culture as well as keeping faithful to his Call at the same time. In order to achieve this goal, I first constructed a list of possible probes to apply to the text. Each probe correlates to a section in the literature review section. Using these probes as guides, I began a pilot study.

I chose four earlier sermons (mid 1990's) to read and determine whether the probes were viable as well as to see if any additional probes were needed⁸. In order to determine whether the probes were viable, I devised a color-coding schema. Each probe aligned with a particular color (See Appendix A). While reading each sermon I would mark every time I saw an example of that particular probe. In addition, if I had any additional critical comments, I would place a number next to the text and record my comment on an additional sheet of paper (See Appendix B). After marking all of the texts, I observed which probes were strong and which probes that I needed to remove from my list. From this process my probes were whittled down from twelve to nine. Once I had decided on my probes, I went back through those four sermons (using the

⁸ Currently, all of Hybels' sermons since 1990 can be found on the Willow Creek Association Home Page. After paying \$32.00 for the first four sermons (price included a Willow Creek Association discount through my church), I decided to inquire about accessing Hybels' sermons for no cost. Thus, my friend Stu Boehmig graciously offered to contact Jim Mellado, the president of the Willow Creek Association, to discuss the possibility of waiving the cost for downloading sermons. Coincidentally, Jim Mellado first began his association with Willow Creek while working on a similar project for Harvard Business School; as a result, Mr. Mellado was very sympathetic to my cause.

colors as my guides) and pulled examples of each probe to help clarify for the reader.

The following probes were my guides for analyzing Hybels' texts:

1. Is Hybels' discourse inclusive (language, examples, appeal to all ethnic and socio-economic groups) and/or does his discourse privilege any particular group of people? For example: *The best analogy I can give you is that if you fly a private airplane, if you're going to buy one it doesn't matter what year an airplane it is (Hybels Vision '94).*
2. How practical (applicable daily principles) are Hybels' messages? For example: *By the time I was twenty I had enough of all of those things [money, power, and toys] that I realized that just spending the next forty or fifty years of my life getting a little more of them...wasn't going to satisfy my soul (Hybels A Vision for the Church).*
3. Does Hybels' language promote loyalty and commitment to listener's occupation, family and/or church; if so, how? For example: *My mind drifted back to Willow Creek, as it always does whenever I'm anywhere... (Hybels Defining Our Beliefs).*
4. Are there any examples of familial language in Hybels' texts; what form do they take? What images of family does he endorse? For example: *Ephesians 5:25 changed my attitude toward my wife because I grew up in a setting where it was a male-dominated culture...Ephesians 5:25 says, 'Husbands, treasure your wives' (Hybels A Vision for the Church).*

5. Does Hybels address the generation gap? Does he compensate for it? How?
For example: *If we would put up a timeline representing your life history...you could draw our attention to that day [defining moment] in 1931 or '51 or '81 or '91 when, for however many number reasons... (Hybels Defining Our Beliefs).*
6. How does Hybels motivate individuals to volunteer and to excel? For example: *The Bible says when a biblically functioning community is operating right, everybody discovers their spiritual gift...doing something that makes them feel a part....So there's unity and a sense of interdependence on one another (Hybels A Vision for the Church).*
7. How does Hybels clearly articulate goals for the church? For the individual members? Are these goals attractive, compelling? How? For example: *The Bible says in a biblically functioning community teaching will be transformational. Fellowship will be vulnerable and real; it'll be heart to heart and soul to soul, deep, searching, loving, grace giving, life giving to each other (Hybels A Vision for the Church).*
8. What sort of management style does Hybels' messages reveal? For example: *I want to give credit where credit's due. I think in our weakness and in our confusion, the staff in particular, the management team and other groups tried as best we could to just roll up our sleeves...and face these challenges squarely (Hybels Vision '94).*

Initially, I sought numerous sermons to choose the most applicable, but over the past few years Hybels has decreased his teaching engagements. Thus, in the fall of 1999, only nine sermons were available to analyze. After downloading the nine sermons (See Appendix C), I analyzed the texts by applying the above probes. During this process, I noticed an emerging probe that had not been as apparent in my pilot study; throughout Hybels' sermons he often spoke *for* God. Noting each occurrence as God Talk (GT), I quickly realized the importance of this finding and as a result, the findings around God Talk became my fourth chapter. In summation, when reviewing these texts three themes emerged: Hybels as the Motivator, Hybels as the CEO, and Hybels as the Conduit of God, which I will develop in the chapters that follow. Chapter four will contain my conclusion.

CHAPTER ONE: HYBELS AS THE MOTIVATOR

The art of persuasion has been studied since the dawn of time. Influence and leadership go hand in hand “since leaders must shape the attitudes and behaviors of others to help groups reach their goals”(Hackman and Johnson 124). Most pastors’ jobs hinge on their ability to successfully influence members especially in this time at the dawn of the new millenium where volunteers are scarce and a multitude of additional stimulus are competing for members’ interests and attention. Encouraging members to tithe (a gift of their time, talents, or resources) may be the focus one-month, while a nudge toward serving in the soup kitchen may dominate the next. Truly successful leaders do not merely influence their constituents, but empower them (Maxwell 187). Hybels uses varied motivational tactics to empower others to reach their goals depending on the situation, but throughout his sermons three dominant rhetorical strategies emerge: motivation by friendship, motivation by providing the best option, and motivation by challenges.

The motivational tactics Hybels employs stand in contrast with Americans’ traditional plausibility structure concerning “preaching.” For most, the term “preaching” evokes a certain emotional response derived from our personal experiences with preachers. Peter Berger suggests most Americans associate a certain evangelistic fervor with the term “preaching”: “A peculiar mixture of arrogance (‘I know the truth’) and benevolence (‘I want to save you’) has always been the chief psychological hallmark of missionary activity”(“Consciousness” 38-42). In Berger’s terminology, peoples’ expectations for preachers to act, speak, and perform a certain way denote a long-held

plausibility structure. Hybels, through his language, moves to break the stereotypical mold of “preaching,” and to “realign” his congregants’ notions of what is credible and appropriate from the pulpit.

Motivation by Friendship

One of the biggest differences between preachers in the past and today stems from credibility. In a recent book Haddon Robinson suggests that “A century ago, the pastor was looked to as the person of wisdom and integrity in the community. Authority lay in the office of pastor” (Hybels Mastering 19). Today, pastors continually struggle with gaining individuals’ attention and appearing “credible” in the eyes’ of their congregation. In another passage Robinson stresses that “the average preacher today is not going to make it on the basis of the dignity of his position”(Hybels Mastering 19). In order to go beyond positional credibility, Hybels attempts to build credibility by identifying with his audience, or, in other words, being their friend. Gregory Pritchard affirms this notion with his findings from his dissertation on Willow Creek Community Church when he suggests that “‘Preaching’ in the modern mind implies a self righteous and judgmental attitude. In contrast, Hybels is seeking to create a level playing field where all are equal in the sight of God. It is no accident there is no preaching pulpit in the auditorium at Willow Creek”(419). Hybels challenges the status quo by stepping off the spiritual pedestal of the past, rhetorically “joining” with his congregation.

Focusing on various aspects of friendship enables Hybels to approach individuals in a way that deviates from the historical view of a preacher. Often times, preachers seem distant, untouchable, and infallible, not Hybels. Hybels humanizes himself through

his examples and as result becomes accessible to his congregation, for example, “How Jesus ever choked back calling him [Pontius Pilate] a little pint-sized demi-god, I will never know. He’s got more self-control than I have”(Hybels Power). Oddly, the quotation elevates Jesus’ response of tolerance while simultaneously suggesting the potential for “humanness” in Jesus’ response, the same possibilities that Hybels could exercise. Throughout his sermons Hybels focuses on the importance of relationships, establishing a sense of community, having an intimate conversation, incorporating humor, and being vulnerable with his friends.

Relationships – Hybels laces his sermons with success stories of individuals that began a relationship with God because church members extended their hands. Willow Creek places strong emphasis on relational ministry. Hybels often preaches about Acts 2:42 where “people in that church continually devoted themselves to teaching, fellowship, communion and prayer”(Hybels Church at its Best). The concept follows that individuals in a Biblical functioning community interact differently with one another. For instance in one sermon, Hybels mentions his daughter’s experience to illustrate friendship, “Man, Shawna, you’re a great friend to your friends. You give yourself to your friends. I mean you put your whole heart into it.’ She said, ‘Well Dad, they’re my friends.’ You know, in the first church, people were so filled with the love of Christ that they spilled that love all over the relationships in the church”(Hybels the Church at its Best).

In another instance, Hybels stresses the importance of breaking the desire to live an independent life, “Friends, the flow of God’s power into your life or mine requires a

password. And the password is that single four letter word, ‘help’”(Hybels Power).

Willow Creek has a variety of ministries to care for the whole individual; as a result, Hybels’ words appear to ring more credible because of the support ministries that the church offers. Many criticize Hybels for catering to America’s consumerism mentality by providing these services, but Burger suggests, “If Hybels is to Protestantism what Nike is to gym shoes, is this bad? If he can bring people to belief via their busted autos, how is that different from what the old-time sages did when they offered succor to the sick and lame?”(JesusChrist.com).

A Sense of Community – Reinforcing the aspect of relationships, Hybels stresses that everyone is in the same boat. Traditionally pastors oftentimes have distanced themselves from their congregations, set themselves apart, but not at Willow Creek. Rather, Hybels attempts to ignite the hearts of his constituents by stressing all that God has accomplished through their church:

Most of those who preceded us in church history went to their graves without ever seeing a stage like this filled with one end to the other with freshly redeemed people...without ever being in an auditorium this size...and we have, for some reason known only to God, been the recipients of, I think, almost unprecedented amounts of God’s power and grace (Hybels Vision Night 1999).

This quotation signifies Hybels’ belief that Willow Creek is a special community, uniquely graced by God. Hybels’ language strengthens that sense of community by using first person plural pronouns. Pritchard’s study counted the number of times Hybels used first person plural pronouns ‘us,’ ‘we’ and ‘our’ and during a year’s weekend messages

[seeker services]. Pritchard found that “Hybels uses the first person plural pronouns ‘we’ 2,084 times, ‘us’ 1,062 times and ‘our’ 1,007 times. This averages out to be 76.91 times each message that Hybels creates a verbal community with his words”(412). In addition, Callahan supports Hybels’ notion of focusing on establishing community by saying, “Increasingly, unchurched people will be drawn to churches that care. High-compassion, high community congregations will thrive in the coming years”(31). Hybels promotes the notion that devotion to God and to one another will provide great dividends for the Kingdom.

Conversation with a Friend – Much of Willow Creek’s literature suggests that Hybels does not preach, does not teach, rather, he has a conversation with a friend. Hybels’ sermons serve as evidence for this ideology by the frequent use of the phrase “You know, friends” (Hybels Who Owns What). The term “friend” helps to break down barriers and propels the notion that he is trying to help out of love. In addition, the term “friend” connotes a sense of brotherhood and camaraderie; one that calls you “friend” understands your situation.

Contemporary illustrations convey Hybels’ image as one that is “in” the world and thus reinforcing the sense of camaraderie. Hybels desires to stress this image, as is apparent by the fact that sixty to seventy percent of his illustrations are derived from current events (Hybels Mastering 36). Identifying with one’s audience through current events is another means for the pastor to bolster his or her credibility. For instance, when discussing finances Hybels mentions “the average American gambles away over \$1,100 per year” or “remember the stir that Ted Turner caused some months ago when he gave a

billion dollars to the United Nations”(Hybels Financial). In another sermon on power, Hybels draws a parallel between Samson’s ability to overcome thirty men and the Super Bowl by asking the audience to “think of the offensive and defensive side of those people out there all turning on you at once, with real mean intentions in their spirit, 22 against one”(Hybels Power). Contemporary examples establish a sense of identity for the pastor as one that does not live in a bubble, rather as one who understands the struggles of the daily grind.

Hybels also utilizes practical applications to solidify identification with his friends, for example, “For over 20 years now, I’ve been advocating a very simple kind of starter plan to help people get going with a basic financial plan. I call it the 10-10-80 plan...the first ‘10’..goes to God’s work and the church you’re a part of. The second 10 percent goes to your savings and investment fund” and the remaining eighty-percent one allots for living expenses (Hybels Financial). Pritchard’s study supports my findings about Hybels’ sermonic approach when he counted the number of times Hybels used the word “friend” in a year’s worth of sermons: “the word ‘friend’ was used 1-7 times [each sermon] and ‘friends’ 321 times, for an average 7.93 times each talk. This helps shape the style of communication”(Pritchard 420). Hybels’ understanding comes through the eyes of a friend, someone who jogs with them, listens to them, and wants the best for them.

Humor – Hybels also incorporates humor to break down traditional barriers between the pastor and his congregation as well as strengthening his case for “humanness.” Hybels’ humor comes in many different shapes and sizes. At times he

criticizes himself --“A few years ago, I heard one of the best sermons of my life. I didn’t give the sermon, I said I heard the sermon”(Hybels Jesus at His Best); often times he criticizes other Willow Creek staff personnel (always followed by a quick “I was only joking”), and sometimes he displays humor the old fashioned way, personal stories. For instance, Hybels relates: “...my guys were giving the universal sign and gestures of disapproval and screaming obscenities, a very colorful group. We’d sail upwind and on the way downwind they’d start telling jokes, jokes that were way over the moral edge, but funny, oh golly. Then I’d get a case of the guilties for laughing at them...”(Hybels One Life at a Time).

Hybels’ humor differs from traditional preachers, because its primary function seems to be to display his “humanness;” entertainment value is secondary. Through his humor Hybels hopes to enhance his credibility which differs from traditional pastors who already had it due to their status in the community. On another occasion Hybels tells the story of a great famine in Samaria where food was so scarce that “ ‘a donkey’s head was sold for eighty shekels of silver, and a fourth of a kab of dove’s dung for five shekels of silver.’ Order that at a drive-up window sometime”(Hybels Stockpile). Humor allows Hybels to show that he is human and that pastors do not always take themselves so seriously.

Vulnerability – Friends share their lives with one another. True friendship mirrors a tennis match, serve and volley. At times one listens while at other times one needs to share. Hybels opens himself up so that others know he struggles just like they do, showing that he is not infallible. For instance, he says, “Friends, I hope you know, I’m

not above this fray. I am frighteningly capable of crossing lines and caving in to fear, the need for approval and so on. I cave in more often than you would think, certainly more often than I wish I did”(Hybels Power). In Nathaniel Hawthorne’s novel, The Scarlet Letter, Hester Prynne wore a letter “A” for adultery on her chest because she knew that divulging her lover, Dimmesdale, the town pastor, would have crushed his credibility. Today, there are numerous divorced pastors, representing a change in the traditional plausibility structure that suggested all pastors must be either single or happily married. Pastors crossing moral and ethical lines still may not be accepted, but Americans today are far more forgiving than in the past. Motivating by friendship proves more challenging for pastors because it requires them to give more of themselves. All of these tenets suggest a shift to a much more personal church. The pastor, not only through his words but also through his actions, must initiate the “personal” touch.

Motivation by Providing the Best Option

Understanding the current culture, Hybels plays on the consumer mentality of most Americans and hopes to establish the argument that he has the best “buy” or best option for them. Contrary to traditional preachers who adhere to the notion “Preach the Word!...that is where any theology of preaching must begin," Hybels rarely exegetes¹ scripture (Duduit 13). Rather, Hybels chooses a pertinent topic and draws support from scripture to lend credence to his argument. For instance, Hybels believes that when he talks “openly and without embarrassment about God’s wonderful design for human

¹ To exegete scripture means to give “an explanation or critical interpretation of the text”(Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary, 1985 ed.).

sexuality, speaking positively and in a God-glorifying way, that's big news for many. It breaks open their stereotypes of dreary Christianity and accusatory preachers" (Hybels Mastering 90). Don Cousins informs us that, 'Bill is more of an evangelist/prophet...'" and thus has more of a bent towards topical over traditional expository teaching (Pritchard 221). Pritchard goes on to say that Hybels' "method of speaking is focused upon the goal of changing the audience's mind and practice about the topic at hand"(221). Addressing topics, rather than scripture, allows Hybels to focus on broader interests to push toward what he believes is the "best option" and to keep their attention.

While Hybels refrains from scriptural interpretation as the focus of sermons, he does often reference scripture to solidify his chosen topic; yet this too is less formally tied to the text than is the case with traditional preaching. Often Hybels utilizes paraphrasing of Biblical text to address his audience. His argument, rather than the specific verse, becomes the locus. By paraphrasing Biblical stories, Hybels transforms often-obscure concepts into modern day realities, using techniques that feed his narrative drama. For instance, Hybels, when discussing "power," colors the story of Peter's denying Christ in order to make his point:

The heat gets a little too high, there's too many Roman soldiers running around, the fear gets a little too intense, and in Jesus' moment of greatest need, Peter takes off to cover his own backside. He's powerless to stand up to his own fear...Have you ever known anybody who makes bold promises and yet lacks the internal strength to carry them out? Promises related to character or conscience or perseverance or loyalty or honesty or fidelity, promises, bold promises. But then

when the heat gets too high there's not the internal strength to carry them through.

Did you ever do that (Hybels Power)?

By simplifying Peter's story into modern language, Hybels transforms this historical figure into a person to whom the audience may relate. In addition, once the audience views Peter as a fallible peer, it makes the transition much easier for Hybels to lead the audience to see that they might fall into the same category as Peter. Thus, paraphrasing provides Hybels the opportunity to maximize the story's impact by grounding within the audience's experience and using it to point the audience toward what Hybels believes to be the best option.

In order for Hybels' paraphrases to motivate his audience toward action, Hybels understands they must see him as credible; Hybels "believes that his ability to influence others is a result of his credibility" (Pritchard 392). Listeners may select Hybels' "best" option because they trust him. Bennis and Nanus emphasize trust because "leaders are being scrutinized as never before" and as result Hybels has demonstrated over time that he is one others trust (11). Hybels appears to have that trust. When Hybels encouraged individuals to join small groups, they did. When he suggested therapy as an option to help walk through life's problems, the counseling office was flooded with phone calls. People derive credibility from a wide variety of sources, but whether its prestige², power³, or attractiveness⁴ Hybels tops the charts and as a result, people listen. Hybels' credibility enables him to make the argument for the "best option."

² Hybels founded one of the nation's largest churches, is the author of best-selling books, and serves as one of Bill Clinton's spiritual advisors.

³ By helping establish the Willow Creek Association, Willow has positioned itself as the leader for the megachurch movement with Hybels at the helm.

Hybels operates under the assumption that human beings are driven by self-interest; in other words, they desire what is best for them, and believe that by satisfying felt needs, they will become fulfilled. Hybels attempts to persuade his audience that Christianity is the best means to achieve fulfillment (Pritchard 586). Consistent with Berger's argument that the church must align its message with the current plausibility structures in order to remain competitive, Hybels suggests that his option will take you to the finish line the quickest. In short, Hybels ties Christianity strongly with the notion of self-interest. Burger echoes Hybels' sentiment by saying that he feels that "the failure [messages lacking relevancy to most congregations] lies not with the Bible and Christianity but with the churches. The product is good, but the marketing is faulty and out of date" (JesusChrist.com). This line of thinking flies directly in the face of "fire and brimstone" preachers of the past; preachers who motivated by fear and would never entertain the notion of "marketing" the gospel. Instead, Hybels embraces the current plausibility structure that the church must be marketed and appeals to each constituent's self-interest through personal success stories, others' success stories, and spiritual accolades.

Personal Success Stories – Hybels demonstrates through personal stories that he is fallible, but through obedience to God's prompting, he has been successful and if hearers are obedient, they will experience the same success. For instance, Hybels shares that there was a time he had a reluctance to share his faith with others, "I was playing it

⁴ Most view Hybels as an attractive man whose dress parallels a businessman moreso than a traditional pastor.

safe. I was making sure that my personal Christian convictions didn't upset anybody's apple cart," but over time he realized that the downside risk to sharing the gospel diminished in comparison with the joy he felt when someone accepted the gospel (Hybels Stockpile). On another occasion Hybels relays a story from a stranger he met who said, "The minute I found out you were the guy from Willow Creek, my walls went up. But you just talked very naturally about how whether or not you were a pastor Christ had changed your life and God was real and made a difference" (Hybels The Stockpile). Hybels seems to be preaching by example. Historically, preachers were not supposed to "take the pulpit to celebrate the virtue and strength of their own faith" (Steimle 3), but again, Hybels offsets his success stories with his failures in order to demonstrate his "humanness." For example, Hybels says, "sometimes you hear the stories that I tell of the seed that falls on fertile soil. Maybe I ought to balance it out and be a little more revealing about all the seed that I sow that seems to just be a bust" (Hybels Stockpile).

In addition, Hybels does not back his listeners into a psychic corner, such as Jonathan Edwards and other traditional preachers have done with their fear appeals, where people had no option but to believe. Rather, Hybels suggests what has worked for him and hopes they will see the fruit in his life, for instance:

Again, you can form all kinds of opinions about this kind of thing when Jesus was at his best. My own opinion, however – and that's all it is, my own humble opinion – is that Jesus was at his very best when he would move in close to a solitary human being and then love them with a supernatural love or grace them

with an unexpected gift – maybe the gift of forgiveness...”(Hybels Jesus at His Best).

Hybels understands the culture and implies that Christianity may offer the forgiveness that some have been seeking. He plays on this notion and suggests that becoming a Christ follower has done wonders for him and can do the same for you as is evidenced by his saying “I would have to say that after being a Christ-follower for almost thirty years now, the passages in the New Testament that still bring tears to my eyes...are those texts that begin with an unsuspecting man or woman going about their everyday life and then they encounter Jesus Christ in some way, and they wind up forever changed”(Hybels Jesus at His Best). He implies that the listener can be that “unsuspecting man or woman” and that they can “wind up forever changed.”

Others' Success Stories – Often times Hybels uses other people to make his point, for instance, he says, “Last night after the 7:00 service, a guy came down and he said, ‘I’m one of those guys whose afflicted with affluence.’ He said, ‘Every time I do another big deal, make a big check, I just spend it on myself, and I’m so sick of my consumptive lifestyle I could puke’”(Hybels The Church at its Best). Hybels chooses a person with whom many can easily identify hoping to motivate the listener to examine his or her own life. On another occasion, Hybels mentions an affluent businessman who was moved by a guest vocalist from an “impoverished area” and gave Hybels a check for \$5,000 saying, “I have a little something here. I just hope you can use it”(Hybels Who Owns What?). Hybels goes on to explain for that impoverished church, a \$5,000 gift is parallel to “someone putting a \$7,000,000 check in our offering”(Hybels Who Owns What?).

Through this story, Hybels relates the wonderful impact one's financial gifts are capable of making in people's lives.

Through others' success stories Hybels hopes to inspire listeners toward what Hybels considers the "best option." He offers a wide range of stories in hopes that someone will identify with at least one of the stories and envision him or herself assisting the Kingdom with his/her time, talents or resources. Hybels operates under the assumption that individuals make time for those items in their lives that hold importance. In the same way, a business scholar suggests "there is always time for inspired work. Inspired work is approached eagerly and conducted lovingly" (Vaill 219). By inspiring others, a pastor seeks to "help people discover their gifts, to equip people, mobilize them, encourage them, and unleash them so they can advance the ministry" (Hybels and Hybels 154). In the long run, Hybels portrays the "best option" as individuals using their gifts to God's glory and hopes to make that apparent through other's success stories.

Spiritual Accolades – Appealing to individuals acting out of self-interest, Hybels demonstrates that his option provides eternal rewards. Hybels suggests that "the Bible says at the moment he gained something far more precious than the eyesight he had received earlier. He gained life! A whole new life – life with new promise and new purpose...Life with a promise of eternal life"(Hybels Life at His Best). On another occasion, when discussing being a good steward, Hybels suggests that God would say "I'll open up the windows of heaven and bless your life if you're careful with my stuff," or suggests "the money given to the poor is registered forever on the ledger sheets of heaven," and "God saw every check that you wrote" (Hybels Who Owns What?). In a

culture that bears so many hardships (i.e. poor fiscal responsibility), Hybels hopes to show his listeners that it does not always have to be that way; he has better alternative free from undue added pressure due to lack of planning and self control in the financial realm.

Historically, Christian pastors usually have claimed their purported means of salvation is the only way, but they never had to market it. Peter Berger suggests that “the religious tradition, which previously could be authoritatively imposed, now has to be marketed. It must be ‘sold’ to a clientele that is no longer constrained to ‘buy’”(Berger, The Sacred Canopy 138). From the beginning when he surveyed his surrounding community, Hybels has understood the importance of “marketing” the gospel. His marketing plan includes appealing to each individual’s desires to serve him or herself and to satisfy felt needs. Hybels uses personal success stories, others’ success stories, and spiritual accolades to motivate by providing his hearers with an alternative or “the best option.”

Motivation by Challenges

When Hybels needs to move individuals immediately, he challenges them. This motivational tactic most closely resembles those pastors of the past who used fear and guilt as their primary motivation toward action, but Hybels always spins it in a unique way. For instance, when discussing stewardship, he says, “How would you feel about knowing that the divine audit is happening Wednesday?”(Hybels Who Owns What?). In the past, a preacher may explain to the audience how they are feeling or how they should feel, instead Hybels allows for the individual to figure how he/she is “feeling” for him or

herself. When challenging his congregation Hybels may even mention the devil or hell, for instance, “if you were the evil one, and you wanted to make sure that Willow Creek would not achieve its redemptive potential...I contend you’d stop it right here. See, if you can cause people not to get saved, it’s a good bet they’re not going to wind up growing if they’re not saved”(Hybels Vision Night 1999). The difference between Hybels and other pastors is reflected in his ability to gauge his audience and soften his language, for instance, instead of the devil, “the evil one.”

Earlier I mentioned Hybels’ desire to establish a community and verbalize this notion by using plural pronouns. When he challenges individuals, I found there is a fundamental shift from the inclusive first person “we” pronouns to “you.” Pritchard reinforces this finding through his research, “Hybels’ challenged Harry⁵ with the second person pronoun ‘you’ 6,152 times during the year. With a ‘You,’ Hybels points a verbal finger at visiting Harry and gives him responsibility to make a choice”(734). Pritchard goes on to say that Hybels does not necessarily challenge, rather Hybels “actually coaxes, suggests, pleads with, requests, and confronts unchurched Harry”(738). In many ways, Hybels has an arsenal of motivational techniques that he implements according to the situation; his ability to adapt the technique to the situation sets him apart from preachers of the past who seemed to believe that there was only one way. Using Pritchard’s

⁵ Hybels defines unchurched Harry as “a composite man that is probably in his family room with his feet up on the foot stool reading the paper or watching TV with a can of beer in his hand. Now that’s point “A.” There are thousands of unchurched Harrys that are not being reached....How do we bring this guy out of his chair all the way to a point of Christian maturity?”(Mellado 6).

categories as a guide, I found that Hybels coaxes, suggests, pleads with, insinuates, and confronts⁶.

Coaxes – Hybels coaxes individuals by leading them through a line of thinking toward a particular action. For instance, in one sermon Hybels says, “Why doesn’t everybody just very quietly right now – not even audibly perhaps – but why doesn’t everybody in this church tonight just simply say the four letter password: help. ‘God, I need your help.’”(Hybels Power). Earlier in the sermon Hybels claimed that he too needed God’s help, so he is not asking anyone to do something that he himself would not or has not already done.

Suggests – Hybels often suggests a certain perspective or point of view that his hearers might want to explore, for instance, “I want to suggest that every person here make a commitment to doing 1999 right from a financial perspective...I want to suggest that we all commit ourselves...”(Hybels Who Owns What). Again, Hybels includes himself in the suggestion, that “we all” make this decision together. Including himself, already having established his credibility, makes the suggestion seem more realistic and feasible. On another occasion when discussing commitment, Hybels says “You don’t want to stand before God someday and say, ‘Hey, you know what? I was like a commitment-free person...never really aligned myself...and really committed myself to the church’”(Hybels Church at its Best). Directly after this statement Hybels encourages audience members to “pick up a membership packet if you haven’t yet”(Hybels Church

⁶ I found Pritchard’s work very useful and called upon these categories to answer my questions about plausibility alignment in regard to Hybels. I used four of Pritchard’s five categories, which were: coaxes, suggests, pleads with, requests, and confronts.

at its Best). Hybels almost always provides a practical means to work toward the stated suggestion. By doing so, Hybels resonates to a culture that claims “don’t waste your time doing things that do not produce immediate gratification or reward”(Barna 61).

Pleads – On extremely important issues I found Hybels takes a more emotional approach, he pleads: “You know, if the Holy Spirit asks you to do that, boy, I pray you’ll do it. I mean, I really pray that this just won’t be another talk that you go, ‘7.5,’ but that you really listen to the Holy Spirit about these matters, friends”(Hybels One Life at a Time). This is a believer sermon which explains the reference to the “Holy Spirit,” but one can see the emotional difference, e.g., “I really pray” and “ that you really listen”, between this approach and coaxing or suggesting. This method mirrors the stereotypical fire and brimstone preacher but with a softer edge because Hybels is perceived as their friend.

Insinuates – On certain occasions, Hybels allows the listener to ponder over concepts and ideas. “You think about this. You read the Scriptures from cover to cover, everything God gives us he wants to see multiplied. Think about that. God gives us our minds”(Hybels Who Owns What). Hybels encourages listeners to test what he says in order to validate for themselves his statements.

Confronts – Hybels’ final mode of challenge emerges when there is a sense of urgency that calls for a response. In situations where he confronts his audience, Hybels does not mince words, for instance, “Let’s be real for a moment...Some of us have crossed a serious line of some sort recently, and I’m not trying to make you feel worse. I take no delight in that. But I do have to ask you a question: Are you going to have the

power to do it differently next time?”(Hybels Power). Again, the all-inclusive “us” appears, followed by a disclaimer, and then the question addressing “so what are you going to change about your life?” The majority of Hybels’ challenges appear at the end of his sermons in the form of a final thought. The difference in Hybels and traditional preachers is not so much the confrontative style, but the “let’s be real for a moment” and his ability to confront, challenge, but still be viewed as a “friend” who desires the best for them. From his discourse, Hybels appears to care passionately about helping individuals become fully devoted followers of Christ, not just filling up the pews.

Hybels has an innate ability to choose the previous styles of challenge appropriately. Various Willow Creek personnel give credit to Hybels’ spiritual gift of evangelism for his ability to choose accordingly. Again, the difference between Hybels and other pastors is not in his ability to challenge his congregation, rather, his rhetorical choices dependent on the situation.

In summation, Hybels attempts to shatter the stereotype of dull, accusatory, and out-of-touch preachers by appealing to his audience in innovative ways. Hybels understands that the audience is in a continual state of flux, and that as a result it is imperative that he be adaptive. Hybels understands that unlike the past, his title as pastor does not automatically evoke a sense of respect in his listener’s ears. Rather, his words must ring relevant and sincere if he desires to impact his congregation. Hybels’ motivation manifests itself in the forms of friendship, the “best option,” and by challenges. The effect of Hybels’ language is to eliminate the previous gap between pastor and congregation member. By sharing his own life with his congregation, Hybels

appears as a friend who cares about the listener's wellbeing, not as someone who is always instructing his congregation how they should live. Hybels understands his audience is driven by self-interest and hopes to align his words with that ideology, knowing that if he is successful, their allegiances will more than likely change. Finally, there are times where Hybels must challenge his congregation directly, but even then, his approach differs depending on the situation. As America changes, Hybels understands that his methods of motivating may also have to change. In the same way, Hybels also understands the way he governs the church might also have to deviate from the traditional model.

CHAPTER TWO: HYBELS AS CEO

The emergence of “megachurches” marks the dawn of a new age, an age where one’s ability to lead effectively appears higher on the list of job qualifications for pastors than their ability to preach and teach. Mellado suggests that in recent years “the leadership demands required to successfully manage a larger more complex organization outgrew the capacity of most of the preachers. Most ministers entered the ministry to preach and teach, not to lead”(15). Barna goes so far as to say “the future of the Church largely depends upon the emergence of leaders – not necessarily seminary graduates, pastors, or professional clergy, but individuals called by God to lead – who will commit their lives to the Church and cast God’s vision for ministry without flinching”(34). This new leadership imperative calls pastors into an unfamiliar domain and marks another way that the church is aligning its message with the world.

As stated earlier, these “megachurches” are a direct response to individuals’ consumerism mentality and thus each church competes to service the most needs: “the biggest churches offer not only spiritual attractions but such features as movie theatres, weight rooms, saunas, roller rinks, and racquetball courts”(Guinness 12). In other words, the church adjusts their typical format and adds amenities to appeal to the masses, thus adding credence to Berger’s argument that in order for the church to survive it must be marketed. Studies indicate that once a church reaches the “critical mass of one thousand, the sky is the limit for its financial and organizational potential for further growth through a myriad of dazzling modern insights and technologies”(Guinness 12). Twenty years ago such terms as “financial and organizational potential” would have been thought to be

heretical when describing the church, but the rhetoric has changed. The line between secular and sacred has become less definitive. Management guru Peter Drucker suggests:

All institutions, including governments, churches, universities, and so on, will become more interdependent, more market- and customer-driven. Today it is a world of infinite choices. With churches, it used to be that you were born into a denomination and stayed there. In the fast-growing pastoral churches, which are the most significant social development in this country, 90 percent of the members were not born into the denomination. So competition in all realms is acute (The Shape of Things To Come).

Today, consumers place the same expectations on churches as they do on businesses in the marketplace. As a result, in order for churches to meet consumers' expectations, leadership in the church must mirror leadership found in the marketplace.

Hybels embraces this ideology in that he believes as churches continue to grow in size that the pastors will "provide much of what a Chief Executive Office provided for a for-profit company. These leaders would cast vision for the church, attract high quality people, align them with their unique gifts, and have them all pulling together in the same direction"(Mellado 15). The CEO parallel continues into dictating Hybels' salary. In a *Time* magazine article Hybels explains that he calculated the average salary for CEOs but in a move unparalleled in the business community, he placed a self-imposed freeze of \$80,000 on his salary.

This business imperative within the church is not limited to Willow Creek. Churches across the nation are hiring clergy and non-clergy alike to serve as their CEOs.

For instance, First Presbyterian Church in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, recently hired Steve Lineberger, a former Sara Lee Executive, to serve as their first CEO. Over the last five years, First Presbyterian Church has added two new services and a plethora of new ministries; as a result, they found it necessary to hire a CEO to lessen the burden on the senior pastor Russ Ritchell. Much like the marketplace, bigger churches appear to be gobbling up many smaller churches by offering a more desirable product.

In short, due to the consumerism mentality that most Americans display, “megachurches” are flourishing because of their abilities to align their numerous services to meet the most needs the quickest. As a result of these expanded services, pastors’ roles within these churches has shifted from primarily preaching and teaching to leading. Hybels heads the pack of pastors that see themselves as leaders. A careful study of Hybels’ rhetoric reveals that vision casting, empowering, and managing as the three main tenets to this new leadership imperative that propels Hybels into the role of CEO. This chapter will address how Hybels, through his language, shifts the traditional head pastoral emphasis from teacher and preacher to leader.

Vision Casting

In the business community a clearly communicated vision has become a virtual necessity, and most successful leaders according to Bennis and Nanus “acquire and wear their visions like clothes. Accordingly, they seem to enroll themselves (and then others) in the belief of their ideals as attainable, and their behavior exemplifies the ideals in action”(46). From an administrative standpoint, a compelling vision provides individuals with a sense of purpose behind their task. In addition, if each worker understands the

over-arching prime directive then minor problems will be clarified against the backdrop of the vision. The vision at Willow Creek, under Hybels' leadership, is known more commonly as the mission statement, "We want to turn irreligious people into fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ"(Hybels & Hybels 167). Modeling successful businesses of today Hybels sets a different level of expectations unknown to most churches by adding a mission statement. The expectations of the mission statement are spelled out more explicitly in a seven-step strategy. According to Willow Creek's literature, "every believer at Willow Creek sees it [the seven-step strategy] as their blueprint to accomplish our mission"(Hybels & Hybels 169). Hybels provides his congregation with an overarching vision and then seven smaller visions to break down the daunting challenge of essentially turning "atheists into missionaries"(Hybels & Hybels 168). Through Hybels' sermons he continually reinforces each and every one of these seven smaller visions.

Step 1: Build An Authentic Relationship with a Nonbeliever – Hybels strongly believes that "in our current culture, the cause of world redemption is going to be won or lost depending on whether Christian leaders build relationships with unchurched people and then – by teaching and example – encourage those in their church to do the same"(Hybels & Hybels 170). Throughout his sermons there are numerous references to the *Becoming a Contagious Christian* class, which "instruct(s) and encourage(s) our believer to proactively build relationships with irreligious people for the ultimate purpose of leading them to Christ"(Hybels & Hybels 170). In a recent sermon, due to a

communal goal to emphasize evangelism, he even encouraged members to “go through the Contagious Christian course again”(Hybels Vision Night 1999).

On other occasions, Hybels relies on his ability to share personal success stories to convey the vision. For instance, Hybels tells a story about purchasing a sailboat for recreation and how he “initially intended to build a team with all Christian crew members,” but felt an impression from God saying that he wanted him “to build a crew of people outside the family of God”(Hybels One Life at a Time). Hybels goes on to say that over the years “four people in this sailing program have come to Christ already over the last seven years, and none of them probably humanly speaking would be in the kingdom tonight....were it not for listening to promptings to reach out to people who are far from God”(Hybels One Life at a Time). In casting visions, Hybels typically starts off with a success story and then widens his lens to include the whole church, for example, “I dream about churches being filled someday with believers who are mature and who manifest maturity by having hearts like the Father’s heart toward lost people”(Hybels One Life at a Time).

After Hybels casts the vision, he challenges the members of Willow Creek to help fulfill the vision, for example, “if a church collectively commits itself to raising its evangelistic temperature, what is the upside potential of that in a church like Willow? I was thinking about it this week. It could be breathtaking. Can you imagine if all of us at New Community, if each one would reach one this year?” (Hybels The Stockpile). If a challenge is fulfilled, Hybels also shares that with the congregation as well. For instance, over three years ago Hybels dreamt “of the day when every Christ-follower at Willow

would consider it normal to be building relationships with people far from God...” and then Hybels shows the congregation on a slide that there has been “almost a 2,000 increase in our weekend services from 1995 to 1998”(Hybels Vision Night 1999).

Through Hybels’ discourse and life example, it is very apparent that he believes winning people to Christ is accomplished best one person at a time.

Step 2: Share a Verbal Witness – Throughout Hybels’ discourse he continually stresses that “it’s not enough to merely enter into the world of nonbelievers” and “build relationships with them” because there will come a time where a verbal response will be required (Hybels & Hybels 170). Again, Hybels relates this vision through a personal illustration:

There came that fateful day when I knew I needed to begin a spiritual conversation with Dave. You know, the Bible says that the message of Christianity must be cognitively appraised before it can be acted upon by anybody. In other words, there is a body of truth that must be communicated and then understood before anyone ever comes to faith. And we – people like you and me – are charged with knowing that body of information cold, backward and forward. We are charged with communicating that body of information winsomely and creatively and accurately so that people can decide what to do with the message once they hear it and understand it (Hybels One Life at a Time).

In addition, Hybels encourages preparation because he “think(s) God will open up more opportunities to those of us who keep our swords sharp than to those of us who are rusty

and ill-prepared”(Hybels One Life at a Time). Hybels suggests that although these first two steps would revitalize the church, that the journey is much easier with a partner.

Step 3: Bring the Seeker to a Service Designed Especially for Them – Because Willow Creek has poured millions of dollars into designing a service that will appeal to the unbeliever, it is now the responsibility of the members to bring them to that service. Hybels suggests that:

Something very powerful happens when a seeker comes into this auditorium on your elbow or mine, and sees normal-looking people dressing normal and talking normal and he hears fantastic music and enters into the experience of great drama, video, or dance. Then he hears a relevant, Holy Spirit-inspired high quality message from one of the teachers. The spiritual potency associated with these services, friends, is unbelievable...And every weekend God would love to be working in the heart and the soul of your seeking family and friends. But you've got to get them here (Hybels One Life at a Time).

Hybels continually challenges his congregation to improve in this facet of the vision, for instance, on one occasion he offers some helpful hints, “focus on one couple or two couples or one or two or three individuals and pray for them like crazy”(Hybels One Life at a Time). To substantiate his challenge, he often ascribes percentages to his theories, for example, “my experience tells me that 75% of the reason that a seeker attends a weekend service with me is because the quality of our relationship”(Hybels One Life at a Time). He models the vision for his congregation and also reiterates the importance of

each step by reinforcing the significance of developing an “authentic relationship” with the seeker.

Step 4: Regularly Attend a Service for Believers— After the seeker has crossed over into the world of believers, Hybels then stresses that it is their turn to initiate the vision with another and that occurs only if “the hearts of our believers [are] filled to overflowing with love of another kind if they’re going to be...salt and light to seekers”(Hybels & Hybels 177). Hybels believes that hearts are primarily filled while worshipping with other believers. In many ways the cycle of the vision begins in step four. New Community, the believer service, provides Hybels an opportunity to “exert leadership among the family. I can shore up a sagging value, talk about a new opportunity, or point out the next hill we’re going to take, and we can have confidence that we’re handling ‘family matters’ without boring or confusing seekers”(Hybels & Hybels 176). Thus, it becomes apparent why Hybels desires for New Community services to be filled, so he “can exert leadership.” Understandably then, while I was compiling research for this section, I found an overwhelming number of Hybels’ sermons came from New Community Services. Hybels’ vision casting primarily occurs in the New Community Services. In recent years, Hybels rarely teaches in the New Community service, but when he does, the word “vision” usually appears in the title, for instance, the strategic plan “dreamed of a day when thousands of Christ followers at Willow would love Christ enough that they would carve out time in the middle of a busy week to come together corporately and to worship God...from 1995 to 1998 we have added about 2,000 people to New Community”(Hybels Vision Night 1999).

Step 5: Join a Small Group – New Community provides many opportunities for growth, but according to Hybels, small groups “provide the optimal environment for incubating the maturing process”(Hybels & Hybels 178). Due to Willow Creek’s size, losing oneself in the crowd is easy and “that’s why we want Willow Creek not to be a church that *offers* small groups but to become a church *of* small groups”(Hybels & Hybels 178). Small groups allow for people to “share the same values and languages and prayers...”(Hybels One Life at a Time). In many ways, Hybels measures one’s spiritual temperature by one’s interaction with small groups. For example, Hybels retells the story of a casual conversation he had with a seeker at a sports banquet and relays the subsequent events as God knocked on this guy’s heart because Hybels seemed “normal.” Hybels recalls the convert’s story: “I started coming to Willow. After several months at the weekend services, I committed my life to Christ. Then I got baptized and I got in a group, and now I’m here and I’m going to lead a group.” Then he said to Hybels, “So just thanks for what you did that night at the banquet”(Hybels Stockpile). This quotation serves two purposes; it allows Hybels to demonstrate Willow Creek’s mission statement and also serves as another personal success story. Due to Willow Creek’s size, Hybels demonstrates that genuine growth and accountability will only occur among a “little platoon of believers”(Hybels & Hybels 178).

Step 6: Discover, Develop, and Deploy Your Spiritual Gift – Hybels strongly believes in discovering one’s spiritual gifts. On numerous occasions, Hybels mentions that his particular gifts are leadership, evangelism, and teaching (Hybels & Hybels 179). Hybels often stresses that the “Bible assures us that all Christ followers have at least one

gift and that God places gifted individuals just as He desires in His church”(Hybels & Hybels 179). By stressing spiritual gifts, it appears Hybels attributes value not only to each person, but also to their potential contribution to the church via their spiritual gift(s). Everyone has a role he/she can fill.

Step 7: Steward Your Resources in a God-Honoring Way – Contrary to traditional stewardship campaigns Willow Creek does not send “pressurized mail” or “hang thermometers on the wall”(Hybels Who Owns What?). Hybels does not approach financial stewardship in the traditional way because he believes “in the end, financial stewardship isn’t a money issue. It’s a heart issue. And that’s why it’s the last of the seven steps. A human heart needs to be transformed before a person’s wallet reflects full devotion to God”(Hybels & Hybels 181). Not surprisingly then, Hybels tells visitors at Willow Creek “please don’t give [money] if you’re a visitor”(Hybels Who Owns What?). Instead, he teaches visitors fiscal responsibility and offers the 10-10-80 Plan (See Chapter 2) and “how to be good managers of stuff that actually belongs to someone else”(Hybels Who Owns What?). In addition, Hybels states the claims of the Bible to encourage giving; for instance he suggests that if one gives ten percent to God that not only does that “demonstrate your full devotion to God...but you also unlock the door for his supernatural involvement in your personal finances;” or later he states that “there is also an accompanying promise of God’s full blessing and favor on our lives”(Hybels Who Owns What?). As a result of this approach, regardless of whether he is genuine or not, all of Willow Creek’s financial needs continue to be met year after year.

These seven steps of vision casting are especially important to the vitality of Willow Creek because of the numerous facets that require volunteers to run them. According to Cathy Burnett, the executive assistant to the president of the Willow Creek Association, nearly 5,500 volunteers fill 6,500 volunteer positions (Burnett). Peter Drucker states that attracting and holding volunteers is directly attributed to a clear mission because “people need to know what their organization stands for and is trying to accomplish”(Drucker The Shape of Things to Come). Hybels steps outside the traditional profile of pastors where “less than one out of every ten senior pastors can articulate what he believes is God’s vision for the church he is leading”(Barna 36). Jones suggests that “history repeatedly has shown that people hunger for something larger than themselves. Leaders who offer that will have no shortage of followers”(177). Jones’ assesment holds true in the case of Hybels. Due to the transforming organizational structure which depends on volunteers, vision casting enables Hybels to “provide [s] the all-important bridge from the present to the future of the organization”(Bennis & Nanus 90). In addition, he instills a sense of confidence among the members that typically translates into higher “levels of achievement” because their work contains a heightened sense of purpose (Bennis & Nanus 93).

Empowering Others

Once Hybels’ etches a clear vision for the church he then challenges each member to do their part because he knows the vision will not become a reality without their contribution. Leaders understand that they cannot accomplish everything on their own and “capable managers do not do everything themselves” (Jackson 10). As a leader,

the pastor is responsible “for assessing the character, skills, life experiences, temperament, personality, and spiritual gifts of each member of the team that are available to accomplish the task at hand...people flourish when they’re freed up to contribute to a plan’s success” (Hybels and Hybels 151). According to Depree, a true leader is not afraid of others, but encourages his or her followers to “realize their full potential” (xix). In the same way, Jones in her book Jesus CEO, states:

Jesus as a CEO was eager and intent upon hiring people he felt could replace him. ‘Greater things than I have done shall you do,’ he promised. Jesus did not hoard or guard the power of his office. He kept teaching and sharing and demonstrating it so team members would learn that they, too, had the power to do what he had done (151).

By empowering others, leaders duplicate themselves, and much like their efforts in the movie *Multiplicity*, the duplication process is not exact. Rather, each follower applies the passed on knowledge through his/her own personal lens. In other words, followers use their leader’s principles to help them achieve communal as well as individual goals. Hackman and Johnson suggest that leaders must “structure tasks so that followers experience initial success”(120). In short, a leader must set up people to succeed. Hybels’ primary tool for empowering others is setting people up for success by encouraging them to determine their gifts and by placing them in church responsibilities according to their giftedness.

Since the beginning of Willow Creek, Hybels has placed an inordinate amount of emphasis on the topic of giftedness. Max Depree, a well-known guru in leadership, says,

“behavior is the best way to communicate.” Indeed Hybels’ own behavior demonstrates the giftedness concept. Recalling Willow Creek’s beginning, at a crucial point for the church, Hybels posed the question “Who has the strongest leadership gifts?” and he answered “Well, I think I do” in the now famous Howard Johnson meeting (Hybels & Hybels 75).

Toward the end of 1980’s Hybels was experiencing a period of exhaustion and burnout because he had “allowed his ministry to become structured in such a way that he poured far more time and energy into teaching, which drains him, than into leadership or evangelism, both of which energize him”(Hybels & Hybels 108). Against the advice of church leaders across the nation, Hybels implemented a team teaching approach to alleviate this additional anxiety. Historically, most pastors view their primary role as teaching their congregation, but Hybels was stepping back from this ideology and in turn, taking a conscious step toward embracing his leadership gift. Initially, when I began this study I had hoped to draw extensive comparisons between Hybels’ language in the “seeker” and “believer” service, but as a result of team teaching, Hybels now preaches primarily at the seeker service which places more emphasis on evangelism. Hybels’ actions seem to solidify the importance of giftedness in his life.

Hybels’ attitude toward serving according to one’s gifts serves as the benchmark for the rest of the congregation. As a result there is a strong emphasis on discovering one’s gift so that God might use you, for instance, “See if you can cause people not to get saved, it’s a good bet they’re not going to wind up growing if they are not saved...they’re not going to find their spiritual gift”(Hybels Vision Night 1999). Discovering one’s

spiritual gift holds more importance than in the past because of the necessity for each volunteer to serve effectively. Hybels states that “the Bible says when a biblically functioning community is operating right, everybody discovers their spiritual gift...doing something that makes them feel a part....So there's unity and a sense of interdependence on one another” (Hybels A Vision for the Church). This interdependence is shared by Barna as the primary means to free those pastors without the leadership gift: “the solution is to utilize the special and necessary gift teachers and preachers bring to the Church, while releasing them from the burdens of leading people. In other words, we ought to create teams of capable individuals who have complementary gifts and abilities so that the Church can move forward strategically and efficiently”(Barna 38). The onset of spiritual gifts has sparked a decentralization of power within the church as pastors have shifted much of their responsibility to the laity.

Despite the need for laity leadership, from the beginning Willow Creek decided that a new ministry would not be adopted without the “right leader” in place. Willow believed that “an excellent service product couldn’t happen without excellent leadership. It was committed not to ‘providing service’ but ‘providing excellent service!’”(Mellado 13). This philosophy strays from traditional church philosophy that establishes products or ministries according to needs demonstrated within the congregation, but this is another manifestation of Hybels aligning Willow Creek with business practices found in the marketplace. In Hybels’ eyes, placement according to giftedness is essential for the church to function properly. For instance, Hybels sought out those individuals who shared his spiritual gift of evangelism so that the “seven or eight hundred of us with the

spiritual gift of evangelism” could “harness the horsepower of that gift”(Hybels Vision Night 1999). Each individual has a role and serves a purpose.

Again, the idea of placing one according to giftedness is not a new concept, but the church in the earlier twentieth century had strayed away from the traditional model of the church. Hybels believes Willow Creek returns to the traditional model of a church, the church found in Acts 2:42 that epitomizes a Biblically functioning community, a community where everyone is equal and everyone is needed in order for the community to function properly. Peter Drucker reinforces Willow’s model by suggesting that the explosive growth of megachurches, like Willow Creek, “rests on these institutions’ dedication to a single purpose: the spiritual development of the parishioners”(New Pluralism). Unlike the church of old where the pastor alone held the authority to interpret scripture, balance the budget, or spearhead the stewardship campaign, today’s megachurches demand leadership from the laity and in order for that to happen, the pastor must empower them to do so. Unlike former Fortune 500 businessman Max Depree, who failed “to identify, develop, and nurture future leaders,” it appears that Hybels, by focusing on spiritual gifts, has found a means to propel Willow Creek into the next millenium (12). In the same way that Willow Creek’s seven step strategy mirrors a company’s business plan and empowering others parallels the importance of professional development in the business world, contemporary management strategy suggests the importance of measurable goals achieved through a manager.

Manage

According to Hybels, the church is the most difficult organization in the world to manage. In a talk on leadership at the Willow Creek Leadership Conference, Hybels mentioned that he told Bill Clinton, in one of their monthly meetings, that leading Willow Creek Community Church was more difficult than leading the United States of America. Hybels' rationale follows that the church is a volunteer-intensive organization and as a result, leadership is cast in a whole new light. Traditional motivational factors in the marketplace such as power, money, and status hold less importance. Thus, there is the need for pastors to cast an effective vision, empower others to perform the necessary tasks, and then to manage them accordingly. Robbins observes that managers "achieve goals through other people"(3). Managers are expected to define the goals, map out a strategy to successfully obtain them, assign individuals' specified tasks, and provide effective communication channels to ensure quality at every step of the way. James Autry describes management as a "sacred trust in which the well-being of other people is put in your care during most of their waking hours. It is a trust placed upon you first by those who put you in the job, but more important that that, it is a trust placed upon you after you get the job by those whom you are to manage"(Autry 15). Up until now we have seen how Hybels incorporates business practices, such as vision casting and placement according to giftedness, into the church, but management practices?

Pastors face the daunting task of achieving results while at the same time allowing God to work. Os Guinness wrote a book discussing this very dilemma, he says, "secularization often deceives Christians before they are aware of it, including those in

the church-growth movement. How else can one explain the comment of a Japanese businessman to a visiting Australian? ‘Whenever I meet a Buddhist leader, I meet a holy man. Whenever I meet a Christian leader, I meet a manager’”(Guinness 49). To further illustrate the point, Barna mentions one pastor’s frustration when he emerged from a board meeting and noticed that his notes included: “attract and keep more visitors; raise more money so the church can fund the ministry agenda approved by the elders; raise the community’s awareness of the church; and expand the roster of ministries and programs under the church’s umbrella”(32). In this pastor’s mind, the definition of “success” had changed from “preach and teach” to numeric indicators. By looking at Hybels’ rhetoric, one will see how he handles the same problems.

As Robbins’ definition states, managers “achieve goals through other people.” Traditionally, the term “goal” lay dormant in most churches. How can one measure the impact of a certain ministry on an individual’s life? Almost three years ago individuals in Willow Creek began discussing a strategic plan for the church and whether that plan should include goals for the church. When they first mentioned the addition of goals to Hybels, he was hesitant because Willow Creek had not had “any fixed goals in the first 20 years at Willow,” so why did Willow Creek need them now (Hybels Vision Night 1999)? After much reflection and discussion Hybels decided that “if you choose the right goals, shouldn’t goals pull us toward becoming a true Acts 2 biblically functioning community? Shouldn’t goals be high enough to pull the best out of everybody?”(Hybels Vision Night 1999). In the end, the church decided to add goals because:

we wanted to hold ourselves accountable...we wanted to challenge ourselves...we wanted to be intentional...so we set goals in each of these areas--- goals to pray toward, goals to strive toward, goals to keep us focused and unified, goals that would help us walk our talk and live out our values like the early church lived out their values (Hybels Vision Night 1999).

Through his rhetoric it becomes clear that as a manager, Hybels believes that goals are a necessity.

As a pastor, Hybels understands that many individuals may question attempting to quantify the spiritual, and so in order to pacify their fears, Hybels states, "I say to them: I have determined that goals are good and goals aren't God"(Hybels Vision Night 1999). In order to strengthen his argument, Hybels says, "I want to talk about missing a goal for a second to prove that goals aren't gods. We missed three of the goals. I didn't kill myself. I didn't kill any staff. You didn't kill me. Of course, you found out about it now, and there might be something under my car when I go out there"(Hybels Vision Night 1999). In addition, he makes it clear that "every time we put a chart up. Please friends, please remember that in the great cause that we're in every single little increase you saw in those charts, every number represented a life. When that weekend number came up, I had a half a dozen friends who are represented in that increase"(Hybels Vision Night 1999). Hybels understands his audience. He addresses their doubts, their fears, and suggests that he wrestled with the same questions running through their minds. In the end, Hybels "learned that even in the face of falling short of goals" that he still preferred to have goals because regardless of whether or not they were attained, it forced

the church to ask the right set of questions (Hybels Vision Night 1999). Like all good managers, Hybels attempts to clarify and justify his actions.

Despite Hybels claim that he “didn’t kill any staff” after missing three goals, it does suggest a broader question, what does happen when staff members miss goals? Apparently when Hybels discussed these goals with the congregation he received a few letters broaching the question “would you ever terminate the employment of a Willow Creek or a Willow Creek Association staff member just because they didn’t achieve the goals that they were supposed to achieve?”(Hybels Vision Night 1999). Hybels, in a very diplomatic tone, approaches the topic head on and states that he “want[s] to clear it up. It’s just family here. Let’s talk about it... Churches need benchmarks. Employees need benchmarks. We have to decide what is reasonable service for reasonable pay”(Hybels Vision Night 1999). In other words, “yes,” someone, or some team of people must be held accountable. Jones suggests there are numerous benefits in stressing accountability and that it is “a key factor in management because it is the cornerstone of empowerment and personal growth. If no one is accountable for a project, no one gets to grow through the experience of it”(217).

In the business world, individuals are promoted or demoted as a result of accountable relationships that measure their results. Willow Creek’s organizational structure mirrors the business world and that includes its hiring/firing practices. In the same way, Guinness found that CEO-Pastors are discovering “that those who live like CEOs are fired like CEOs-and spiritual considerations have as little to do with the ending as with the beginning and the middle”(53). This demonstrates yet another tension of

attempting to align the church's message with the current plausibility structures.

According to Hybels' words, Willow Creek attempts to keep God in the center of all decisions, but the larger the organization the more difficult it becomes to keep everything in perspective.

Although churches may mirror businesses, they are not replicas. As a result, pastors as managers face an interesting set of challenges. Not only must they manage their church like a business, but they also must juggle an accountable relationship with God, the staff, and the congregation. The pressures far exceed those in business because pastors are not merely dealing with the bottom line, but people's lives. This is why some argue one cannot possibly integrate the two. Despite those arguments, Guinness suggests that "if Christians were to use the best fruits of the managerial revolution constructively and critically, accompanied by a parallel reformation of truth and theology, the potential for the gospel would be incalculable"(Guinness 24). From my research, I believe that is what Hybels attempts to do.

In summation, Hybels places a stronger emphasis on leadership than his predecessors. He believes the future of the church rests in the pastor's ability to navigate through the waters of change effectively. Hybels attempts to integrate proven business practices into the church without compromising his or Willow Creek's integrity to help him navigate through tomorrow's obstacles. These business practices include vision casting, empowering others, and managing. The dawn of the new megachurch demands additional assistance to maintain its numerous services; as a result, volunteers are needed even more so than in the past. Research suggests that a clear mission drives most

volunteers. Through his sermons, Hybels reinforces Willow Creek's mission statement and provides his congregation seven steps to arrive at point B the quickest. After Hybels leaves an imprint of the vision on each member's mind, he then challenges each one to do his or her part so that the vision is fulfilled. Hybels' primary vehicle for empowerment rests in placing individuals according to giftedness. In doing so Hybels believes Willow Creek Community Church will most likely resemble the church in Acts 2, a Biblically functioning community. That community needs to be challenged by providing a framework in which to operate; Hybels sees the framework as goals.

Goals are traditionally not found in the church, but Hybels believes they are Biblical, he states, "I thought of some Scriptural evidences of goals"(Hybels Vision Night 1999). Adopting goals where individuals are accountable for the results brings Willow Creek one step closer to the secular world and represents Hybels attempt to align the whole church with the current culture. Hybels does not seem to fear the secular world, rather, he views these managerial additions as constructive if Willow Creek desires to market itself effectively. Hybels desires the best for his church and for his God and believes he can best serve God by using his leadership gift. As a result, his leadership gift affects his approach to the pulpit.

CHAPTER THREE: HYBELS AS THE CONDUIT OF GOD

For centuries pastors have been viewed as God's mouthpiece "to interpret to man the mind of God as it is revealed through Christ"(Jones 2). Historically, sermons have served as the primary vehicle for pastors to relay Biblical truths to their constituents. Perry suggests that "the sermon is the explanation, illustration, and application of God's Word"(16). However, visitors to Willow Creek, at least the average unchurched Harry, view pastors "with a great deal of suspicion. Harry correctly assumes that it is a pastor's job to influence and evangelize him. As a result, his defensive radar mechanisms are on full power"(Pritchard 414-415). Knowing this, Hybels must actively try methods to disengage Harry's radar. Hybels' primary method, as mentioned earlier, is humor. Humor levels the playing field and typically relieves tension.

Through his humor, Hybels hopes to moderate the label of "pastor;" in doing so, Hybels believes that the audience will more easily identify with Hybels, the human being. In the past, pastors gained credibility because they *were* the pastors, but in Hybels' case, even though he must carry out some pastoral roles, he hopes to separate himself from the negative connotations that some audience members may associate with the term "pastor." As a result, Hybels' faces an interesting challenge to serve as the conduit of God for the congregation while at the same time being perceived as someone just like his audience. Through his messages, Hybels seems to steer away from "preaching" and to lean toward "sharing." He implements this strategy in three ways. First, Hybels attempts to convey that his authority from God stems from a personal relationship with God, not because he is the pastor. Second, because of his intimate relationship with God, Hybels is allowed to

speak for God. Finally, in order to help his friends understand the Bible in culturally relevant terms, Hybels often paraphrases (i.e., “interprets” God) for clarification and emphasis purposes.

Authority from God

Hybels’ derives his credibility primarily by emphasizing his close communion with God. From this relationship, Hybels’ language conveys one who speaks as an authority due to his obedient spirit. In the past, a pastor’s credibility was derived primarily from his or her title and role within the community. Today, due to highly visible scandals (i.e. Jim Baker) and a revolving constituent base, pastors must establish their credibility in a more tangible and continuous fashion.

Throughout Hybels’ sermons, he often refers to the Holy Spirit or God as speaking directly to him. For instance, in one sermon Hybels states that “the Holy Spirit convinced me one day. He said, ‘Bill, your job in this whole adventure is not to do behavioral modification. Don’t you ever forget that!’”(Hybels One Life at a Time). On another occasion, Hybels tells his constituents that he was talking to God and then “just as clear as I’m talking to you now, I felt an impression from God saying, ‘Bill, I’m all for this whole new recreational pursuit in your life. I’m all for you balancing the pressures of church work out with some recreation, but I want you to build a crew of people outside the family’”(Hybels One Life at a Time). In another instance, Hybels discusses the Holy Spirit’s influence in his finances. Whenever Hybels is tempted to sign up for debt because he could not wait until he could afford it “the Holy Spirit has whispered to [him], ‘Bill, before you do this, remember what Christ did for you on the cross’”(Hybels

Financial Ten Commandments). In this case, Hybels draws the parallel between loving God and how one uses one's finances. Through his language, Hybels places flesh on God. He speaks to God as if He were sitting right next to him and in turn God replies accordingly. By portraying God as a friend who continually leads him, Hybels implies that God is on his side. How can the audience argue with someone led by God?

Hybels also enhances his credibility by offering numerous examples of his obedience when God has led him to action. For instance, while still in seminary his mentor at Trinity Seminary, Dr. Bilezikian, would plead with God in saying "God, may someone in this class catch the vision for building a biblically functioning¹ community"(Hybels Vision Night 1999). Hybels caught the vision. At that point Hybels suggests "that's when [he] started to realize that when Jesus ascended to his father, he [Jesus] said, 'From this day until my triumphant return to this earth, my number one job, my mission and purpose, is to establish and develop biblically functioning communities, churches, all over the world'"(Hybels Vision Night 1999). Hybels demonstrated his obedience to God by devoting his life to creating Biblically functioning communities.

To further illustrate his empowerment from God, Hybels relates that the "the vast majority, 99 percent I'm just guessing, of Christ followers who dreamed Acts 2 dreams went to their graves without seeing the fulfillment of their prayers and dreams and their service and their giving, their volunteering and their sacrifice and their struggle" but

¹ "The Bible says in a biblically functioning community teaching will be transformational. Fellowship will be vulnerable and real; it'll be heart to heart and soul to soul, deep, searching, loving, grace giving, life giving to each other"(Hybels A Vision for the Church).

Willow Creek, under Hybels' leadership, views Acts 2 daily (Hybels Vision Night 1999). Hybels' implies that his obedience has translated into a thriving congregation.

Finally, Hybels implies that he may be heir apparent (maybe even God's choice) as the Dean of U.S. evangelists. For instance, many view Billy Graham as one of the most effective, influential evangelists in the last century, and yet in a recent conversation between Hybels and Graham, Hybels infers that Graham is passing the torch to Hybels. He states, "the last time I was with him [Graham] he said quietly and quite pensively, 'My era is pretty much over.' Then he looked me right in the eyes, and he said, 'You know, we all only get one era.' He said, 'Make sure you use yours to the fullest. You'll miss it when it's gone'" (Hybels Vision Night 1999). Intentional or unintentional many parallels are drawn between Hybels and Billy Graham -- one of the most effective evangelists in his day, a spiritual advisor to the president, and revered by many within the Christian community.

Hybels authority behind the pulpit appears to stem from his close communion with God. His relationship with God drives his ministry. Hybels focuses on his relationship with God in order to steer the members away from viewing him as his or her "pastor;" rather, he hopes they will join him in his spiritual journey. Through his rhetoric, it becomes apparent, Hybels hopes to "share," not necessarily to "preach."

God Talk

Due to his intimate relationship with God, Hybels believes this gives him the authority to speak for God. Throughout his sermons, Hybels often references what Jesus or God might say about a particular subject. It is apparent through his rhetoric that

Hybels reveres God, but chooses to root his authority behind the pulpit on what he “thinks” Jesus or God may say. Clark suggests that pastors’ “authority in the pulpit stems from his station as interpreter of the Word, and as long as he remains within that role, the minister appears to gain a degree of immunity from criticism that speakers in less authoritative roles cannot enjoy”(394). In many ways, Hybels takes this authority a step further and chooses not to “remain within that role.” In the past, pastors relied primarily on the Word of God as their source of authority, Hybels roots his authority from his relationship with God and supports his claims by suggesting what God would say about a particular topic.

Hybels’ emphasis on a personal relationship with God is evident through his sermons. For instance, Hybels conveys a story about when Jesus was asked about the meaning of life? “Remember Jesus’ answer? He said, ‘At the core of the core, do these two things: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. Come into a relationship with God, one that’s filled with love and peace, security and warmth, guidance.’ Then he says ‘And love people.’” (Hybels Financial Ten Commandments). Life is about knowing God and caring for others. He further illustrates this claim when he says that Jesus “wants you to have that same kind of heart—a heart that says, ‘I have never looked into the eyes of someone who doesn’t matter to God’”(Hybels One Life at a Time). In the past, pastors used scripture to speak for God, but Hybels uses his relationship with God to direct his words.

Hybels also speaks for God in order to convey Biblical suggestions about how to live one’s life. For instance, during a sermon on finances Hybels says “in God’s wisdom,

there is always a direct connect between working hard and then receiving financial remuneration. In God's mind, the two are inseparably linked"(Hybels Financial Ten Commandments). In the same way, there is an old saying that states "you can judge a man's heart by his checkbook." Hybels trains his congregation to manage their finances so that they will be better stewards of God's resources. For example, Hybels says, "once we understand who the real owner of all of our stuff is, then we read the Bible and we discover that God says.... 'Look, I'm going to take a portion of my universe-wide asset pool, and I'm going to make it available to you'"(Hybels Who Owns What?). By serving as the "mouthpiece" for God, Hybels easily addresses topics, such as finances, that often are delicately addressed from some pulpits. On other occasions, Hybels speaks for God in order to punctuate a lifestyle that Hybels believes God expects of all believers, for example, "you know, Jesus, just before he ascended said, 'Here's the goal. You go out and present the Gospel to everyone in the world. Every tribe, every nation, you preach the Gospel to everybody. And then those who become converted, here's the second goal: You teach them to observe all that I've commanded you'"(Hybels Vision Night 1999). Apparently, Bill Hybels informing people how to live their lives does not have the same impact as God speaking through Bill Hybels.

Hybels primarily chooses to speak for God when he desires to inspire or challenge his congregation. For example, Hybels states "what Christ is most committed to these days, what he's been all about since he left until he comes back is the establishment and development of the church, the hope of the world. And that's what we need to be about, and we need to be formally committed and dedicated to it" (Hybels Church at its Best).

On another occasion, Hybels tells a story about a man Jesus healed, Hybels says “I imagine Jesus saying to this guy, ‘Now you’ve got two good arms. What are you dreaming about doing now with your two good arms?’”...Hybels suggests the guy might have asked Jesus the same question, which allows Hybels to speak for Jesus about the vision of the church... “I dream about churches being filled someday with believers who are mature and who manifest maturity by having hearts like the Father’s heart toward lost people...”(Hybels One Life at a Time). Speaking for Jesus allows Hybels to convey that he is not speaking on his own volition, rather, his authority comes directly from God. In addition, when Hybels speaks for Jesus, it enables him to craft his words for his desired purpose, for instance:

I could hear Jesus say something like this to Matthew before he leaves: ‘Hey Matthew, a couple of words. First, man I love your heart. So many people join my family and they overdose on fellowship and the worship and the purpose and the adventure and all that, but they forget about people back at the office, people who were buddies... I saw you saying ‘I’ve got to reach my friends.’...Don’t ever lose a heart like yours. Keep it soft towards lost folks all the way to the end. The second thing, Matthew, I love your courage. I love your guts. What you did was unconventional, innovative, it was high risk, never been done before, but you didn’t care. You went for broke! You did what you could the best you could. You took a risk. Keep your guts. Keep your courage high all the way to the end.’(Hybels The Stockpile).

Hybels does not know what Jesus would say to Matthew in this situation. He only infers what he might say by his knowledge of Jesus and the Biblical text surrounding this event. Speaking for Jesus enables Hybels to demonstrate Jesus' effusive praise of Matthew for his actions and to increase the likelihood that others will desire to receive the same accolades.

In short, Hybels hopes that his ability to speak for God will be granted from his intimate relationship with God. Without the foundation of that relationship, Hybels' might not appear credible in the eyes of his congregation. He speaks to his congregation as if he is accepting an award for a friend who cannot attend. He knows his friend so intimately that his answers and actions would mirror his friend's. Portraying such an intimate relationship with God differs greatly from other pastors. This portrayal serves as another example of an alignment shift that may point to Hybels' ability to gauge that society longs for meaningful relationships and as a result he offers his and God's as a model.

Paraphrasing

As stated earlier in the motivation chapter, Hybels refrains from scriptural interpretation as the focus of sermons. Although he often references scripture to solidify his chosen topic, his references are less formally tied to the text than is the case with traditional preaching. In his early preaching days there is more evidence of sermons based on scripture, but since the inception of the "seeker" service, Hybels' sermons seem more topic-focused. One of Hybels' primary vehicles for conveying his topic is through paraphrasing the Bible. Hybels utilizes paraphrasing of Biblical text to engage his

audience in ways which might be more compelling to them. In addition, paraphrasing allows Hybels to further propel his image as a friend who merely desires to share a story or two. Again, his argument becomes the locus of the message rather than the specific verse. Clark suggests that:

As God's agents, ministers can speak on issues of major moral import and expect a respectful reception. They have to address their topics, however, with language appropriate for making the divine incarnate, language distinct from that used in conventional human parlance. If ministers speak too informally, parishioners may view them as having abandoned their roles as God's spokesmen on earth (386).

The last sentence by Clark addresses an issue that demonstrates a fundamental shift seen in Hybels' preaching – his choice of language. Hybels' paraphrases do not shy away from being too informal; rather, it appears through Hybels choice of words that it is his intention to be less formal. In contrast to Clark's assessment, Hybels seems to believe that others will more easily relate and identify with a person who addresses them in the same way Hybels would address a neighbor across the street.

Hybels' also paraphrases the Bible in order to simplify stories that may be confusing for one reason or another. For instance, when discussing the parable of the sower, he says, "I love this parable because it helps me. Jesus said, 'There was once a sower. He had that bag of seed, and he knew what his job was. His job was to scatter seed and to scatter it and scatter it and scatter it'"(Hybels The Stockpile). Hybels' language boils the story down to the crux – spread the Gospel and let God do the reaping. Hybels apparently believes his audience to desire a simple, applicable message. In

another example, Hybels relays the story how the Pharisees attempted to trip up Jesus by forcing him to choose whether or not to heal on the Sabbath: “all he was, was like a cog in the machinery of a sting operation...He looks out over these people who claim to be spiritual, and he says, ‘You don’t care about broken bodies, and you don’t care about broken souls. You just don’t care’”(Hybels One Life at a Time). Paraphrasing stories allows Hybels to teach a lesson in culturally relevant terms. By doing so, Hybels gambles that the audience will listen more attentively.

Paraphrasing also enables Hybels to restate portions of his sermon in order to reinforce his point, for instance, “Jesus said, ‘We will change the world one life at a time. But if you fumble the ball, if you decide not to participate in this grand endeavor, if you get all caught up in other pursuits, if you get distracted or discouraged, if you neglect being loving, carriers of the messages of hope, there is no plan B’”(Hybels One Life at a Time). By paraphrasing Jesus, Hybels’ words gain more authority as he attempts to rhetorically align with Jesus’ thoughts. On another day, while encouraging his congregation to be God’s best, Hybels remembers what Jesus said just before he ascended to his father: “Jesus gathered his followers around him, and he said essentially two words to them: ‘Go tell, go tell. Tell your family and friends that I love them, and my death for their sins can change everything. Go tell neighbors and colleagues that there is a God, that he’s real and that he cares, and he can’t wait to form a relationship with them’”(Hybels You at Your Best). Hybels uses paraphrasing not only to restate what he has already implied or inferred, but also to gain more credence for his words.

Hybels also paraphrases in order to offer the congregation easy-to-swallow sound bytes. Sound bytes, as long as they portray Hybels as credible, allow him to make sweeping generalizations that “bottom line” societies swallow hook, line, and sinker. Throughout his sermons Hybels often attributes ideas to the Bible, but does not reference their origins within the Bible. For instance, when discussing one’s work ethic, Hybels states, that: “scripture teaches that human labor is a good thing”(Hybels Financial Ten Commandments). When discussing finances, Hybels said, “the Bible mentions that people came to see their stuff as really being God’s stuff”(Hybels Church at its Best). When trying to encourage his congregation about a difficult circumstance, Hybels offers: “scripture says, ‘When you come up against a wall, then you just look up and I’ll give you help. And we’ll go through the wall, up it, under it, around it, we’ll find a way’”(Hybels Vision Night 1999). These small sound bytes allow Hybels to root his authority in scripture without referencing the text. Paraphrasing enables Hybels to translate complex ideas, stories, and sound bytes into easily understood and applicable concepts.

Hybels approaches his role as pastor remarkably different from most past and current pastors. By his rhetorical choices, it becomes apparent that Hybels attempts to break the traditional mold of pastors. According to these choices, it appears that Hybels believes that individuals today prefer to engage in conversations with friends, rather than listening to a self-righteous pastor telling them how they should live their lives. In the same way, Hybels models out a conversational approach with God from the pulpit often referencing various ways in which God speaks to him. It appears that Hybels desires for

the audience to perceive this dialogue with God as intimacy. In turn, due to Hybels' intimate relationship with God, Hybels believes he has the authority to speak for God on particular issues. Hybels portrays himself as merely the conduit for relaying a specified message given to him from God. Finally, Hybels understands that conveying information in culturally relevant terms is essential in relating to today's audience. As a result, Hybels often inserts Biblical paraphrases to clarify difficult passages or reinforce important statements. Hybels' three strategies: authority due to a personal relationship with God, his ability to speak for God due to this intimate relationship, and his desire to speak in culturally relevant terms (e.g., paraphrasing), appear to enable him to reach a changing audience while at the same time reshaping their traditional view of "pastor."

CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSION

Societal norms and standards pervade every facet of the American way of life. Every decade, every year, every month these standards vacillate with the changing needs and attitudes of society. Peter Berger labeled these societal norms as “plausibility structures.” In addition, Berger suggests that these plausibility structures underpin our actions. In other words, these structures guide people toward determining what is or is not credible at any given moment in history. As stated earlier, Berger believes in order for the churches’ message to remain credible it must align its message with these fluctuating plausibility structures. Berger’s suggestion implies that churches must “market” the gospel in order for the religious institutions to survive the next millenium.

This study posed the question “Does Bill Hybels create rhetorically a competitive option for individuals to choose?” or another way of saying it, was he effective in marketing the gospel? What plausibility structures did Hybels attack and how? What plausibility structures did Hybels embrace and to what end? How successful was Hybels in accomplishing his goal and if so, by what means? Finally, what were the trade-offs for Hybels and the Church of 2000?

This study shows Hybels has realigned institutional plausibility structures by the following four “re-definitions”: Hybels redefines himself, Hybels redefines his role, Hybels redefines God, and Hybels redefines the message.

Hybels Redefines Himself

Hybels redefines himself to gain credibility in the eyes of his audience. In the past, pastors received positional credibility or credibility that simply was bestowed on

them by virtue of their role, but that is no longer enough; modern day pastors are expected to be all things to all peoples. Shifting his means for establishing credibility serves as the cornerstone for Hybels' institutional realignment. Hybels hopes to humanize himself by using contemporary illustrations and by displaying his personality and friendship from the pulpit, in hopes of breaking any negative perceptions surrounding traditional pastors.

Historically, many pastors have been viewed as disconnected with the "real" world. Instead of preaching "down to" the audience, Hybels asks them to join in on his personal faith journey. He prefers a dialogue as opposed to a monologue. One way that Hybels levels the playing field is by using contemporary examples; nearly sixty to seventy percent of his illustrations fall into this category (Hybels Mastering 36). For instance, when discussing finances Hybels mentions that "the average American gambles away over \$1,100 per year" or "Ted Turner...gave a billion dollars to the United Nation"(Hybels Financial). Using contemporary examples allows Bill Hybels to dissolve negative perceptions of "out of touch" pastors, but in doing so hearers may interpret him as "worldly" in an environment which they hope to be shown their "other worldliness" or "eternal life."

To strengthen his case for "humanness," Hybels also allows the audience to see his personality through his use of humor and being vulnerable. Much of Hybels humor is self-deprecating, showing the audience that he understands he is fallible. For instance, on one occasion he states –"A few years ago, I heard one of the best sermons of my life. I didn't give the sermon, I said I heard the sermon"(Hybels Jesus at His Best). Hybels

vulnerability seeks to establish himself as if he is a self-disclosing friend sharing his life with his hearers. For instance, Hybels says, “Friends...I cave in more often than you would think” or “He’s got more self-control than I have” (Hybels Power).

Through contemporary examples and showing his personality, Hybels hopes to be seen as an approachable friend, but at what price? Contemporary examples allow Hybels to align with plausibility structures earning him the right to be heard, but there is the possibility of going too far in order to identify with his audience. Perhaps his audience was offended when Hybels told stories about his sailing buddies who “were giving the universal sign” or were telling jokes that “were way over the moral edge”(Hybels One Life at a Time). It is also possible that his strategic humanizing diminishes essential credibility that traditional pastors had just because they occupied the role. Such humanizing may also put undue social pressure to continuously be a role model. Pastors who are not approachable are not held as accountable for their actions. Hybels reinvention of the pastor as a friend places more pressure on the pastor to serve as a role model in every facet of his or her life. As a result, there is little division between a pastor’s public and private life. Pastors will struggle with the same problem that face all public figures; they will be constantly under the microscope in every possible setting. Relational evangelism occurs at a cost, but by his actions and rhetoric it appears Hybels believes the cost is worth the price.

Hybels Redefines His Role

Traditionally, pastors are seen as preachers and teachers, but Hybels views himself as a leader. As a result, Hybels applies numerous business principles to Willow

Creek. Hybels' implementation of these principles (vision casting, empowering others, setting measurable goals) marks a shift in how the church is viewed. These new strategies have offered Willow Creek a clear direction, more structure, and a higher standard, but at what price?

Nine out of ten pastors cannot clearly articulate a vision for their church (Barna 36), and yet Hybels offers a seven-step strategy for each member to follow. Hybels understands that megachurches require numerous volunteers in order to be run efficiently and agrees with Peter Drucker that attracting and holding volunteers is directly attributed to a clear mission because "people need to know what their organization stands for and is trying to accomplish"(Drucker The Shape of Things to Come). Clear direction and a worthwhile purpose serve as the common denominator for most successful organizations. Hybels ability to communicate such a vision for his congregation to follow has lifted Willow Creek to its current level of success. As Hybels prepares leaders for future generations, there appears to be few drawbacks for an organization with a clear purpose.

With the vision clearly communicated, Hybels turns manager. As such, he assumes responsibility "for assessing the character, skills, life experiences, temperament, personality, and spiritual gifts of each member of the team that are available to accomplish the task at hand...people flourish when they're freed up to contribute to a plan's success"(Hybels and Hybels 151). In other words, as business managers do, he attempts to see that peoples' skills are maximized for them to operate efficiently toward Willow Creek goals. Some worry, however, that management principles "fit" poorly

certain organizations (e.g. schools, churches whose volunteers and whose goals are altruistic) (See McMillan and Hyde).

Hybels is a self-made leader. If pastors are to assume a more significant leadership role within the church, seminaries need to prepare pastors for such duties. Those pastors without the leadership gift should not be forced to lead in the manner Hybels suggests. The title of senior pastor does not automatically empower one to be an effective leader. In Hybels' model, pastors who lack leadership skills need to surround themselves with a team of people who have leadership gifts in the same way that Hybels needs to surround him with others who complement his gift-mix. If pastors do not augment themselves appropriately, this model will certainly fail.

Hybels also redefines his role as pastor by endorsing the implementation of goals to measure success, as is currently the trend in the world of business. Goals allow churches, like for-profit organizations, simple means to measure their progress. In addition, business literature states that "specific hard goals produce a higher level of output than does a generalized goal of 'do your best.'" The specificity of the goal itself acts as an internal stimulus"(Robbins 221). By raising the standard for churches, churches are no longer able to hide behind their righteous veil when they are inefficient. Contemporary parishioners expect quality regardless of the organization. Goals propel individuals to greater results, but how do those goals translate in the church?

Besides the potential to demoralize the congregation, placing too much emphasis on goals could leave little room for God to work as well. Where do you draw the line between good planning and God working a miracle? There appears to be no counterpart

in the business world for the Holy Spirit and the spontaneous, mysterious work of this entity in the lives of believers. To dilute that power by the exercise of too much human control would be to weaken the central tenet of the Christian church for ages. From his rhetoric, Hybels seems to understand this might be a concern and states “that goals are good, but goals aren’t God”(Hybels Vision Night 1999). In addition, he also desires to make it crystal clear that “every number represents a life”(Hybels Vision Night 1999).

Hybels Redefines God

In the same way Hybels hopes for his audience to view him as their friend, it appears he desires for them to see God through the same lens. Hybels does not preach. He shares. Hybels attempts to demonstrate that his authority is rooted from his personal relationship with God, not because he is the pastor. Throughout his sermons, Hybels often relates how God speaks to him, for instance, “the Holy Spirit has whispered” (Hybels Financial Ten Commandments) or “just as clear as I’m talking to you now, I felt an impression from God saying”(Hybels One Life at a Time) or “the Holy Spirit convinced me one day”(Hybels One Life at a Time). Through his language, Hybels places flesh on God – humanizes him. He converses with God as freely as he does a next door neighbor.

Through his published books, his sermons, and others’ views of Hybels, it is apparent that Hybels reveres and honors God, but less mature believers may misinterpret his reports of ongoing dialogue with God as irreverence. In addition, by placing so much emphasis as God as “friend,” his audience may forget the omniscience and omnipotence of God. On a similar note, while writing this paper I wrestled with Hybels’ continual

usage of a lower case “b” in the word “biblically,” to this critic’s thinking, a symbolic reduction of the Deity. I questioned whether or not I should use the lower case or capital form when using the same word in this text to remain consistent, a move that I eventually decided against. While we have no way of knowing the reasoning behind Bill Hybels’ lower case “b,” it is not inconsistent with the strategy to make God more human and accessible and less Divine and removed.

Hybels Redefines the Message

From the beginning of Willow Creek, numerous religious leaders have criticized Hybels for watering down the Gospel by attempting to market it. Understanding marketing principles from the Hybels’ family business, Hybels founded Willow Creek by asking the question “Why don’t you go to church?” The number one response was, messages lack relevancy. As a result, Hybels opted to depart from the prototypical sermon structure in order to appeal to the masses.

Traditionally, most pastors exegete scripture. Instead, Hybels chooses a pertinent topic and draws support from scripture to strengthen his argument. This format frees Hybels from the constraints of adhering strictly to the text and from the troublesome constraints of language and culture that have limited the interpretation of Biblical purists for centuries. In addition, when Hybels does cite scripture, more often than not, he speaks for God or paraphrases God, Hybels basing his authority for doing so on his intimate relationship with God. In this innovative and gutsy use of God’s word, one cannot deny the rhetorical power. If the audience accepts Hybels as conduit, more than half the battle for legitimacy (ethos) is won.

Starting with his argument, rather than a specific verse, also allows Hybels to appeal to a wider audience. His examples draw individuals into his argument and his paraphrases convert Biblical stories into modern day realities. If the audience views his messages as relevant and easily applicable to their daily lives, then “as consumers” they will return. At the same time, Hybels understands that “the potential pitfall is to concentrate so much on being timely and topical that we lose our biblical distinctiveness”(Hybels and Hybels 187). Willow Creek recognizes this is a large concern and includes as one of their ten core values: “We believe the church should be culturally relevant, while remaining doctrinally pure”(Hybels and Hybels 187).

In Hybels creative re-definitions he faces the daunting challenge of determining how far must one go in order to appeal to one’s audience? If Hybels does not tell the audience what they were hoping to hear, do they still come back? When “marketing” the Gospel, by straying further from the text, Hybels leaves himself open to heightened criticism from more conservative listeners. To retreat to the text, on the other hand, may weaken the contemporary relevance of his message (See McMillan 1988). More tolerant listeners might deduce that the message is still the same; the package has merely been revamped. From an organizational standpoint, the church must address that even if Hybels is willing to tackle this challenge, are others that follow willing to carry this burden?

For example, as the numbers grew at Willow Creek, Hybels understood that some of his more evangelical strategies might lack the impact for mature believers. As a result, Willow Creek began offering a “believer” service during the middle of the week that

follows more closely to the traditional model of a sermon, suggesting that once God has transformed an individual's life the emphasis shifts from packaging to content.

Finally, who can argue with the numbers? Hybels' formula for success has not only produced tremendous results at Willow Creek, but also in countless churches across the nation due to the resources offered by the Willow Creek Association. Willow Creek, under Hybels' leadership, has managed to influence millions, possibly billions of lives as a result of redefining traditional church. Many people are turned off by the package Hybels offers, but many lives have been radically altered as a result of his willingness to approach church in a more appealing way. As a critic and a believer my greatest fear about Bill Hybels' ministry was the possible minimizing of God reported earlier. All of Willow Creek's literature suggests that they believe in the inerrancy of scripture - "the Word of God is not only totally true but it is the primary change agent in the lives of individuals and in the church itself"(Hybels and Hybels 184) -- and yet, they fail to capitalize words such as "biblically" and Bill Hybels dares to speak for God. Despite this fear, overall, I must conclude that Bill Hybels does offer a rhetorically competitive option for today's consumer.

APPENDIX A: CODING SCHEME

KEY

1. Is Hybels discourse inclusive (language, examples, appeal to all ethnic and socio-economic groups) and/or does his discourse privilege any particular group of people?
2. How practical (applicable daily principles) are Hybels' messages?
3. Does Hybels' language promote loyalty and commitment to listener's occupation, family and/or church; if so, how?
4. Are there any examples of familial language in Hybels' texts; what form do they take? What images of family does he endorse?
5. Does Hybels address the generation gap? Does he compensate for it? How?
6. How does Hybels motivate individuals to volunteer and to excel?
7. How does Hybels clearly articulate goals for the church? For the individual members? Are these goals attractive, compelling? How?
8. What sort of management style does Hybels' messages reveal?

APPENDIX B: CRITICAL INSIGHTS

Title: Money, Sex, & Power – Who Owns What

Type: Seeker

Date: 1.10.99

1. Technology...not necessarily good
2. Mentions politics
3. Plays with audience
4. Continually using “us” – implication – we’re all in this together
5. Teaches through parables (personal stories)
6. Possible play off of beer commercial
7. Talking about making the plunge, value judgement attached – it’s a “good” thing
8. Quite the little jokester...think about tallying the amount of jokes in seeker v. believer
9. Joke
10. GT
11. GT
12. GT
13. GT
14. From an audience’s perspective I imagine this is one of the first times they’ve heard about enjoying God’s gifts...and that the gifts could be a large material possession.
15. GT
16. GT
17. Quotes scripture verbatim
18. GT
19. Almost like a challenge
20. Challenge them head on –what’s your plan? Do you have one?
21. Reasoning
22. Quotes scripture
23. Until now, why are you a sermon on \$ now?
24. Mentioning \$’s at a seeker service...are people impressed?
25. Implication being he also saw every check you didn’t write
26. “New” people, feel free to give
27. Demonstrate...Bill thinks (God-like), God gives, models giving by turning around and blessing others...example
28. Makes them think, a little fear, then says...ok. You can change, here’s your chance – carpe diem
29. Eventually, the church should benefit significantly

APPENDIX C: SERMONS

Analyzed Sermons:

- Bill Hybels. "One Life at a Time." Willow Creek Community Church. Barrington, IL. 6 Jan. 1999.
- . "Money, Sex, and Power: Who Owns What [Part 1]." Willow Creek Community Church. Barrington, IL. 10 Jan. 1999.
- . "The Stockpile 1999." Willow Creek Community Church. Barrington, IL. 13 Jan. 1999.
- . "Money, Sex, and Power: The Financial Ten Commandments [Part Two]." Willow Creek Community Church. Barrington, IL. 17 Jan. 1999.
- . "Vision Night 1999." Willow Creek Community Church. Barrington, IL. 27 Jan. 1999.
- . "Money, Sex, and Power: Power [Part Four]." Willow Creek Community Church. Barrington, IL. 31 Jan. 1999.
- . "Life at Its Best: Jesus at His Best [Part One]." Willow Creek Community Church. Barrington, IL. 14 Mar. 1999.
- . "Life at its Best: The Church at its Best [Part Two]." Willow Creek Community Church. Barrington, IL. 21 Mar. 1999.
- . "Life at it's Best: You at your Best [Part Three]." Willow Creek Community Church. Barrington, IL. 28 Mar. 1999.

Pilot Study:

- Hybels, Bill. "Rubbing Shoulders With Irreligious People (9:9-13)." Willow Creek Community Church. Barrington, IL. 6 Jun 1990.
- . "Defining Our Beliefs." Willow Creek Community Church. Barrington, IL. 11 Jan. 1993.
- . "A Vision for the Church (Acts 2:42-47)." Willow Creek Community Church. Barrington, IL. 21 May 1994.
- . "Vision '94." Willow Creek Community Church. Barrington, IL. 19 Jan. 1994.

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- . "One Life at a Time." Willow Creek Community Church. Barrington, IL. 6 Jan. 1999.
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