

Reflections on Bill Hybels

On August 8 Willow Creek Community Church announced the resignation of their lead pastor and entire elder board. This came a few days after their teaching pastor resigned. All of this comes in the wake of sexual misconduct accusations against founding and now retired pastor Bill Hybels that extend from the 1980s to more recent years and which began coming to the elder board's attention in 2014. A story in the August 6, 2018 edition of The New York Times (released Sunday, August 5 on the paper's website) detailing one accuser's experience with Hybels led to the pastors' and elders' resignations. Up to that point, the leadership of the church had defended Hybels against the accusations.

Elder Missy Rasmussen, speaking for the resigning elder board to the congregation on August 8, as quoted by Christianity Today online: "We trusted Bill, and this clouded our judgment...We are sorry that we allowed Bill to operate without the kind of accountability that he should have had...We have no reason not to believe you [referring to the numerous women who have made accusations against Hybels]. We are sorry that our initial statements were so insensitive, defensive, and reflexively protective of Bill. We exhort Bill to acknowledge his sin and publicly apologize."

In announcing her resignation, lead pastor Heather Larson said, "Trust has been broken by leadership, and it doesn't return quickly." Teaching pastor Steve Carter resigned a few days earlier saying he could no longer continue his leadership role at the church in "good conscience."

It is certainly a sad day for Willow Creek and for Christians as a whole. The case of Hybels and Willow Creek calls for sober reflection by ministry leaders.

First, we should acknowledge that Bill Hybels and the church and parachurch ministry he started have done a lot of good, even if you disagree with him as I do about some issues. Hybels's influence has been enormous in evangelicalism over the last four decades. He helped us think in new ways about reaching the lost and people alienated from church. He and his organizations gave us fresh approaches for connecting with this target audience. His book Becoming a Contagious Christian, co-authored with Mark Mittelberg, is one of the best books on relational evangelism I have read. It made a profound impact on me in the early years of my ministry.

Through the Willow Creek Association, the Global Leadership Summit, and the Reveal Study that identified key factors in making disciples, Hybels and his organizations have provided invaluable resources for church leaders. And Hybels has helped raise up others who in turn have invigorated the church, people like Lee Strobel and John Ortberg. Bill Hybels has inspired a lot of people who lead vibrant churches and ministries today.

Yet here we are with this painful truth: *Hybels used his influence to prey upon women who worked for him and admired him.* When this reality finally became unavoidable for teaching pastor Steve Carter as word of the Times article started getting out, he reportedly vomited backstage of the church's Sunday services and resigned on the spot. I feel a little sick myself.

Let's remind ourselves of some lessons in light of the Hybels / Willow Creek story.

1. *Sexual sin damages people and institutions.* Bill Hybels hurt the women he abused. He hurt their families and his. He hurt his church, fellow church leaders, and association. He hurt the name of Christ. He hurt a lot of ministry leaders who looked to him as a mentor. He put evangelicalism's dirty laundry in the front section of the New York Times. Sexual sin casts a long shadow.

2. *Abuse of position eventually comes to light.* Hybels got away with his predatory behavior for a long time. Eventually he didn't. Eventually always comes.

3. *We are all vulnerable to the sinful flesh.* Don't think for a moment that you are beyond temptation. You aren't. Protect yourself at all costs. "If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away...If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell" (Matthew 5:29,30 ESV).

4. *"Success" brings greater temptation.* If you become a big deal, pride calls out to you. It wants you to think you are such a big deal that you can have anything (or anyone) you want. Beware the arrogance of notoriety and power. Beware the "too big to fail" mentality.

5. *We all need accountability.* Hybels desperately needed a board of elders who, though they loved him, held his feet to the fire. Apparently he did not have that, to his and the church's detriment. Ministry leader, make sure there is someone to whom you must report and submit.

6. *We are wise to focus on our spouses.* Married ministry leaders should give priority to their mates. They should draw boundaries around their activities to protect themselves and demonstrate faithfulness to their spouses. It sounds like Hybels put himself in situations where temptation lurked.

7. *We can all be blinded to reality because of our admiration for someone.* I feel for the Willow Creek board of elders. They loved their pastor. No doubt he had a great impact in each of their lives. He played upon their high regard for him. The lesson is not to avoid admiring people who have impacted us; the lesson is to balance admiration with sober awareness of human sinfulness.

8. *We have a responsibility to shape the culture of our churches and ministries related to sexual misconduct.* This is a leadership task we cannot avoid. Our churches need us to say what is right and what is wrong sexually. They need us to say what is unacceptable behavior by a ministry leader. They need us to handle misconduct accusations in a fair and transparent way. The church needs its leaders to lead! (For some ideas on how to do that [see this article](#).)

I pray Bill Hybels will deal honestly and humbly with his sins and know the forgiveness that is his in Christ Jesus. I pray he will take the appropriate steps of repentance. I pray the women he harmed will experience healing in Christ and that Willow Creek church and association will recover under godly leadership. And I pray you and I will learn the lessons of a brother who has done much good for the church and brought much shame on it.