

The Issue Defined

I will place the start of what I am talking about somewhere in the 1980s, with Bill Hybels of Willow Creek, Illinois.¹ With his ‘seeker sensitive’ movement, Hybels began to attract the ‘unchurched’, attract them to church meetings, services, events and activities, that is. He did this by specifically tailoring church life to cater for the ‘unchurched’, giving them what they liked, and removing all talk of ‘negatives’ (such as ‘sin’ and ‘repentance’) which might in any way offend them, put them off and drive them away. Hybels made his motivation clear by hanging a card outside his office: ‘What is our business? Who is our customer? What does the customer consider value?’ He could have added: ‘Let’s give it to them!’ Willow Creek’s premise was that by taking part in church events and activities, the ‘unchurched’ would be turned into people ‘who love God and then love others’. In this way, the people believers want – need – to reach with the gospel were radically redefined. Moreover, the biblical experience of conversion as a crisis was replaced by some kind of spiritual osmosis,² whereby ‘Christianity’ or ‘spirituality’ was absorbed by being surrounded by Christians and ‘church’.

Whether or not Kevin Dyer and Ward Gasque, speakers at an International Brethren Conference on the contribution made by ‘the Brethren’ to ‘worldwide mission’ (held in 1993 in Singapore) were influenced by Hybels I cannot say, but their observations certainly dovetailed with his approach. Kevin Dyer:

We need a new plank of reaching out to the unchurched. We are living in sophisticated societies where television is a major influencing factor. People today want upbeat, fast-moving, creative programming... We need to use various communication techniques to attract people and teach

¹ I am not saying he was the first.

² ‘Osmosis: the process of gradual or unconscious assimilation of ideas, knowledge’.

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principles. Video, drama, monologues, multi-media, music, poems, mime and a whole host of other media are essential for the growing church to communicate with this generation effectively. If we are going to attract and hold people, we must do a whole lot more with our preaching and programme style.³

And Ward Gasque:

My general impression is that it is a great culture shock for almost anyone who does not come from a Christian background to come into a Christian community. Going to church is almost like taking a trip to a foreign country... What we need to think about is how we can make our churches more user-friendly.

Hybels was closely followed by Rick Warren and his seminal book:

The Purpose-Driven Church (1995) is a book written by Rick Warren, founder and senior pastor of Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, California, United States. It was published in 1995, subtitled *Growth Without Compromising Your Message & Mission*. In a May 2005 survey of American pastors and ministers conducted by George Barna, *The Purpose-Driven Church* was voted as the second book most influential on their lives and ministries, behind *The Purpose-Driven Life*, a subsequent book by Rick Warren... Warren writes that every church is driven by something. Tradition, finances, programmes, personalities, events, seekers and even buildings can each be the controlling force in a church...⁴ He proposes that church leaders ask of themselves: 'What is our purpose?', 'Why do we do what we do?', 'What should we be doing?', and 'How will you do that?' In this book, Warren provides a guide to answer these questions on how to do church... The author emphasises an intentional people-building process. He says: 'If you will concentrate on building people, God will build the church'.

³ Kevin Dyer: 'Navigating Troubled Waters' in Harold H. Rowdon (ed.): *The Brethren Contribution to the Worldwide Mission of the Church*, Partnership, The Paternoster Press, Carlisle, 1994, p80.

⁴ 'Every church'? It is to be hoped that some churches are still driven by the Holy Spirit under Scripture.

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The teaching of *The Purpose-Driven Church* was derived from Warren's own experience in leading Saddleback Church from its founding in 1980 to over 10,000 in worship attendance in its first fifteen years, becoming one of the fastest growing churches in America during this time.⁵

The widespread popularity of Warren's system is not in doubt:

Over 400,000 pastors and church leaders from around the world have attended a seminar or conference led by Warren and other pastors who seek to be more effective in fulfilling the biblical Great Commission and Great Commandment... Warren says his organisations have trained 400,000 pastors worldwide.⁶

According to Suzanne Strempek Shea, writing in 2008:

In the shadow of Southern California's Saddleback Mountain... weekly services are held, and more than three hundred ministries are offered, including those for prisoners, business people, single parents, and the mortally ill. Churches in 162 countries comprise Warren's Purpose-Driven Network, which has trained more than four hundred thousand clergy. The mailing list for Pastor Rick's weekly newsletter contains 157,000 names.⁷

Has anybody evaluated all this? Indeed, they have. In 2004, Willow Creek itself undertook and then published a congregational survey entitled: *Reveal: Where are You?* The results showed, in the words of executive pastor Greg Hawkins, that 'the church isn't as effective as we'd thought'. In the Foreword to the report, Hybels admitted:

Parts of the research did not shine brightly on our church. Among the findings, nearly one out of every four people at Willow Creek were stalled in their spiritual growth or dissatisfied with the church – and many of them were considering leaving.

⁵ Wikipedia.

⁶ Wikipedia.

⁷ Suzanne Strempek Shea: *Sundays in America...*, Beacon Press, Boston, 2008, pp142-143.

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But this frank admission has not served to put any brake on the accelerating drive to put what I might call Hybels' and Warren's recipe for success into practice, defining 'success' as increasing numbers of attenders at church meetings and events during which they can be evangelised. Put the brake on? Far from it! Rather, the movement has caught on; indeed, it is catching on more and more, with an increasing number of teachers and opinion-formers putting their weight behind it.

Ray Evans, here in the UK, is the latest and best (by far, in my opinion) advocate of this new way of evangelism. Although he does not endorse everything coming from Willow Creek, Evans admits his debt to Hybels.⁸ And Evans is meeting with 'success': the wide-spread popularity of his work, even before publication, was remarkable, and those who advocate his ideas in print, and do so with enthusiasm, include leading men and women from different sections of the Reformed and evangelical constituency.⁹ Significantly, in

⁸ 'Bill Hybels is one of the world's great Christian leaders and communicators' (Evans p192). But this is not the only favourable reference to Hybels in Evans' book.

⁹ This sample is taken from the pages which precede the title page in Evans' book: 'Ray Evans rescues the issue of church growth... All readers interested in seeing gospel growth in their communities should read this book' (Stephen Gaukroger). '*Ready, Steady, Grow!*... [is] a resource guaranteed to provide church leadership teams with much-needed vision, clarity and on-the-ground help as they seek to labour *and grow* in God's harvest field' (Dave Gobbett). 'Ray has written just the book for us... this is timely wisdom' (Chris Green). '*Ready, Steady, Grow!* is an invaluable guide for church leaders... This book is grounded in confidence in the truth of Scripture, and full of everyday examples and common-sense wisdom' (Sharon James). 'Ray... gets it exactly right... Ray has spotted accurately the problems... With biblical wisdom and pithy insights... driven and rooted in the grace of Jesus... any leader of a church that is growing or wants to grow will think Ray has written this book for their exact problems' (Maurice McCracken). 'This is a seriously helpful book... It's biblical, wise, down to earth and grounded, full of principled pragmatism... a book full of sanctified common sense' (Phil Moon). 'Ray Evans has written this challenging and encouraging book, combining excellent biblical

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their encomiums, they used such terms such as ‘secular’,¹⁰ ‘broad-minded’, ‘well-read’ and ‘common sense’ to encourage churches to read Evans’ book and adopt his prescription¹¹ for getting the churches to ‘grow’ beyond what he called the ‘awkward’ size.¹² They also used the words ‘biblical’ and ‘scriptural’ – though my thesis is that ‘scriptural’ is precisely what Evans’ book is not. But, while they spoke of church growth, never once did they talk of ‘sinners’ being ‘converted’.

I just accused Evans of giving the churches a prescription, noting that he would not agree with my allegation. I admit that in his book, he states:

However, if it sounds that I am saying ‘good method’ is the solution, that would be a mistake. I am not lapsing into a false confidence with an emphasis on technique and control. Reared on the solid, doctrinal ministry of men like Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones,¹³ and the thoughtful teaching of Dr

teaching, pastoral insight and godly wisdom... Every church leader, and many church members, ought to read this book’ (John Stevens). ‘Ray provides helpful advice and useful tools to help churches enter and navigate the waters of gospel impact and growth. This book will be a particularly valuable tool for leaders who find themselves perplexed, not only by the challenges of growth, but also by their churches!’ (Steve Timmis).

¹⁰ ‘Secular: of or relating to worldly as opposed to sacred things; temporal, not concerned with or related to religion’; in others words, non-scriptural. This usually moves into unscriptural.

¹¹ Evans would not like this way of putting it. See the following paragraph.

¹² By the way, what scripture tells us we should be concerned about making the church ‘grow’ (in the sense of numbers)?

¹³ In the chapter ‘Conversion’, I noted that though Evans owns his debt to Lloyd-Jones, he fails to adopt the latter’s rejection of testimonies as an evangelistic tool. I also said that I would return to Evans and Lloyd-Jones. On the issue in hand – setting up activities to attract unbelievers to attend church – Evans certainly does not go along with Lloyd-Jones. Iain H. Murray commented on the practice at Aberavon before Lloyd-Jones arrived: ‘To bridge the gap with those outside [the church], Sandfields for some years had maintained various activities, including football, musical evenings, a dramatic

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Francis Schaeffer, it goes right against my grain to concentrate on what appears methodological or simplistic. Answers with a formulaic ring don't appeal to me at all. But what I am doing is employing biblical insights and common-sense wisdom to help leaders overcome the kinds of difficulties they often tell me they face, but for which they don't get much help.¹⁴

Again:

The last thing I want to do is to fuel a desire, or provide techniques, in order to Produce Impressive Results [Evans' upper case]. But I do want to help you live out a desire to do good things for the God who has loved us and given himself for us. Keep a vision of who he is and what he has done, and this book's advice will be worthwhile.¹⁵

Excellent, except he does the very opposite, and, in the bargain, fails to make me think of Christ – rather like those creation-speakers who fail to give me a sense of the wonder of God and his work. Others, of course, must speak for themselves.

And Evans does speak of a 'scheme':

Put godly, capable leaders into almost any situation and given God's good grace, they will take the work forward. That's why almost any scheme can be made to work.¹⁶

Now I am concerned with two main aspects of the work of men like Bill Hybels, Rick Warren and, in particular in this book, Ray Evans.

First, such teachers take it for granted that the task of the church is to get as many unconverted¹⁷ as possible to attend

Society, and a 'Brotherhood' on Saturday nights... To the surprise of the church secretary, [when Lloyd-Jones became the minister]... those activities particularly designed to attract the outsiders soon came to an end' (Iain H. Murray: *D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones: The First Forty Years*, The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1982, pp134-135).

¹⁴ Evans p10.

¹⁵ Evans p15.

¹⁶ Evans p49.

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meetings of the church in order to be evangelised. In this way, they have radically altered New Testament teaching on the *ekklēsia*, making the church into a pool into which to gather the unconverted in order to fish for conversions – something quite unknown in the New Testament.

Secondly, in pursuance of their aim, they stress that in order to be successful at gathering unbelievers into church meetings and activities, the churches must accommodate themselves and their message to the outsider. If we want to have growing churches – growing in number and size, that is, swelling with ‘unchurched’ attenders in order to evangelise them – we must work out what the world needs, what the world would like, how we can help society or ‘community’,¹⁸ in order to provide what the world wants. Evans, in particular, is a strong advocate of the principle that believers (churches) must form relationships with outsiders, and do so in an institutionalised way, with well-defined and evaluated aims: in other words, he wants a scheme which can and must be managed. If we set up such ‘ministries’, and form such relationships, the world will listen to what we have to say, or at least be far more inclined to listen to it.¹⁹ To ensure maximum and continued proficiency throughout the enterprise, we must continually adapt our message and church life²⁰ to contemporary culture. What worked yesterday may not work today, and almost certainly will not work tomorrow. As a consequence, church members, however painful it may be for them, must recognise that the church will always be

¹⁷ Evans never uses the word in his book, he uses ‘the lost’ once. He never talks of ‘unbelievers’, except twice in quoting one passage of Scripture. As I have already noted, he uses ‘sinner’ four times, three of which are in quotations of Scripture. The New Testament uses the word over forty times.

¹⁸ The current buzz word.

¹⁹ Evans p13.

²⁰ The message and the method are inextricably linked, and each has a large bearing on the other. The method usually conveys more than the message to the average recipient.

transforming itself in order to reach the ‘unchurched’.²¹ It must grow in size. Numbers are king! In all this, the church must stay relevant to society by meeting the needs of the surrounding culture and its local community, and by designing and creating programmes, putting on events and setting up ministries which will address those specific needs. In other words, we are being counselled to use the world’s culture in order to make our message and Christ’s church acceptable to it. We must, of course, be very careful not to confront – certainly not offend – those we are trying to help.²² In this way, over time,²³ the ‘unchurched’ will be drawn into the ambience of the church, their resistance to the gospel will be broken down, and they will become more open to the message.

Thus it is clear that Hybels, Warren and Evans (*et al*) get their ideas almost invariably from the secular world, the world of business and marketing. Whatever the customer desires or demands the church must give. Numbers justify nearly everything. We need a large number of members to do the job in large and extensive premises in which to gather a large and growing number of the ‘unchurched’, so that we can evangelise them. I am deliberately trying to avoid pejorative words, but this is how I read Evans’ book.

²¹ Evans: ‘One of the main issues to think about is not the first ten years of a church plant, but what happens when churches grow and start to level off, once the initial vision is realised? One senior leader’s observation was that many church plants of the 80s and 90s had plateaued, and his conviction was we need to train leaders to keep churches growing into larger size brackets, rather than grow lots of small ones which stall’ (Evans p91).

²² I know of a church which opened a shop to try to reach customers with the gospel. When the manager was challenged about the carnality of some of the material he was selling, and then asked why he did not have texts of Scripture on display, the answer came back at once: ‘We don’t want to upset anybody and put them off’! I know of a church, when it was getting ready to take part in a national evangelistic campaign, ‘reassured’ people that nobody was going to try to convert any adherents of other religions.

²³ Evans pp150-152,172-174, for instance.

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I am convinced that all this is wrong, and by ‘wrong’ I mean ‘unscriptural’, not merely non-scriptural. It is certainly the latter, and admittedly so by Evans.²⁴ But, in the end, it becomes the former. And this is why I write. I want to expose the ideas of Relationship Evangelism to the light of Scripture and thus show the wrongness of this new way of evangelism. It is Evans’ book, in which he sets out with excellent clarity the governing principles and manifesto of the new way of evangelism, which concerns me in writing now. As I say, I want to expose what I consider to be the unbiblical nature of the principles of the new method. Narrow this focus may be, but it is what drives me here. It must be so. It is always the vital question. In the old covenant, it was: ‘To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn’ (Isa. 8:20). Or, as Paul, writing in the days of the new covenant, put it: ‘What does the Scripture say?’ (Rom. 4:3; Gal. 4:30). This is my concern. This is my question. To test what they were hearing, the Bereans searched the Scriptures (Acts 17:11). And, depending on the imperative, Christ had something to say about it (John 5:39). This is my mandate for what follows.

With Evans, I deplore the low state of the churches and the lack of conversions. Nevertheless, I am sure that the new method will prove catastrophic both for the churches²⁵ and the sinners, and I want to do what I can about it. I am contending for the faith, as I see it, and I do so because, as a believer, I am commanded so to do (Jude 3).

I intend to concentrate on one thing, and one thing only. Relationship Evangelism is unscriptural. I am not, in the first instance, interested in whether or not it ‘works’: it is unscriptural; therefore it is wrong; that is my thesis.

²⁴ Evans’ opening remark at a seminar, as reported to me by a friend.

²⁵ I can envisage the church in the not too distant future as some kind of spiritual GP surgery *cum* social-worker office *cum* Citizens’ Advice Bureau, with the elders being selected for their skill as management technicians or auditors. Indeed, see Appendix 4 for the Kempston Grace Church job prospectus.

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In order to make my case, I will first set out what I see as the fundamental flaw in Relationship Evangelism. In a sense, that could signal the end of my book. Relationship Evangelism falls at the very first fence; indeed, it crashes into it! Nevertheless, since I want to drive the point home, I will show where it fails to meet Scripture on subsidiary specific issues – subsidiary, nevertheless vital, issues.

First things first though: Relationship Evangelism has a fundamental flaw right at its heart.