

August/September 2010

A Review of *The Power of a Whisper: Hearing God. Having the Guts to Respond.*

by Bill Hybels (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan: 2010)

by Jack De Vries

What is God saying to me? Does God still speak today, and if so, how can I hear his voice? In my three decades of ministry in the church I have listened to numerous people asking me questions like that. Just last week. A Christ follower was wondering how to discern the voice of God. People in his life were telling him that God told them certain things, words that he needed to hear and heed. But he wasn't sure. Did those people hear God right? He himself was not accustomed to hearing God. He wondered if, like young Samuel, God would speak to him.

I wrestled with these questions myself in a recent message I prepared on Psalm 95. After pointing out the importance of worship, thanksgiving, and true humility before God, the psalm ends with a final stanza which begins with this stern warning: "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts" (7b,8) How does this apply to the modern day listener? How do they, how do I, hear the voice of God today?

Without a doubt, one of the most misunderstood aspects of the Christian life is what we mean when we say that we "heard from the Lord", "received a prompting from God", or otherwise received specific divine

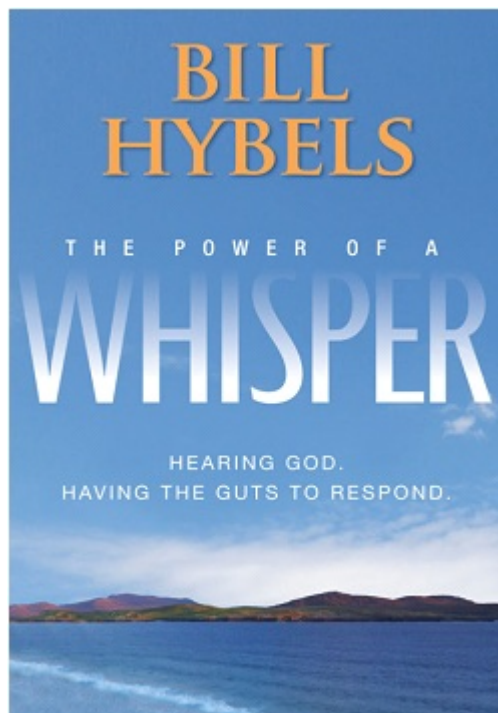
direction. Well, this is the subject matter of Bill Hybels' most recent book, *The Power of a Whisper: Hearing God. Having the Guts to Respond.* Hybels is not the only author who has tackled this subject. Consider Dallas

Willard's *Hearing God: Developing a Conversational Relationship with God*, Henry and Richard Blackaby's *Hearing God's Voice*, or M. Blaine Smith's practical classic *Knowing God's Will: Finding Guidance for Specific Decisions.*

It takes some degree of courage to write about a subject like this, especially since some in the Christian community are uncomfortable with the subjective personal aspects of a relationship with the Holy Spirit. Hybels himself admits a reluctance to write on

this subject:

I have chosen to wait thirty-five years before writing a book about how God's whispers have affected my life - hesitant in part because of the controversy this subject tends to arouse. Even today, when I make public reference to the whispers of God, I barely make it off the stage before a half a dozen people approach to remind me that ax murderers often defend their homicides by claiming, "God told me to do it." Conservative Christians question my orthodoxy when I describe my experiences with the promptings of the Holy Spirit, and secularists either are humored or quietly tell their spouses that Hybels has lost his marbles. Or both.



Still, I've come to believe that hearing the whisper of the transcendent God is one of the most extraordinary privileges in all of life - and potentially the most transforming dynamic in the Christian faith. When people hear from heaven, they are rarely the same again. (16-17)

For Hybels this book has resulted from what he calls "a fifty-year whisper-fueled odyssey." And the book bears testimony to that. It is jam-packed with illustrations and stories, most from his own life, in which Hybels shares how he heard God whisper in his life. In true Hybels' style, these stories draw the reader in and makes the 269 pages a quite easy read. It is the kind of book one could easily pack into a holiday suitcase and devour in a few hours of relaxed reading.

The first two chapters give an overview of Biblical evidence of God speaking to people. Chapter two is particularly helpful as it lists the many times people in the Bible heard God speak – people who "are working to improve their batting average of hearing – and heeding – the whispers of God.... What Jesus was so sure of, we can know for sure too. God is *available*. He is *approachable*. And he is ready to talk to you now." (61) For many Christ-followers these are assuring words.

But how does God speak to us? In five of the chapters (5-9) Hybels break down God's "whispers" into five different categories: God's written whispers (Scripture), those that come during difficult circumstances (the dark nights of the soul), those that are regarding parenthood and parenting, those that come through others, and those that change the world. In our relativistic contemporary world it was good to find Hybels moor the whispers of God solidly in the truth of God's Word. As

Hybels writes: "We must fix our gaze on the path of provision that God already has paved. He has given us full access to his wisdom, full assurance of his faithfulness and full availability of his power through the pages of Scripture." (141) The other four categories further illustrate that God continues to speak to us in various and diverse ways.

The most important chapter in this book is chapter four: "How to know when you're hearing from God." This is the nagging

question people have. In this chapter and in Appendix 2 Hybels gives five filters he has used to help him test every whisper he receives:

1. Is The Prompting Truly from God?
2. Is It Scriptural?
3. Is It Wise?
4. Is It In Tune With Your Own Character?
5. What Do The People You Trust Most Think About It?

This chapter is very practical and offers good advice when people want to know if they are hearing God speak to

them or discern what others might be sensing God saying to them.

Overall *The Power of a Whisper* is a very readable, simple, yet practical book on a critical and important subject: hearing God. Some might judge this book too simplistic for such a weighty subject. And in some ways their judgment has merit. Like some sermons, this book has more illustration than explanation. But in our secular book, this is the kind of book which will speak to sceptics. And knowing Hybels, this is target audience: irreligious people who think that far too many Christians have lost their marbles. This is the kind of book you can give to those curious about God and inquisitive about Jesus. Reading this book might just convince them that the God who spoke in the past continues to speak today. And hearing God, they might

"Without a hint of exaggeration, the ability to discern divine direction has saved me from a life of sure boredom and self-destruction. God's well-timed words have redirected my path, rescued me from temptation and re-energized me during some of my deepest moments of despair."
- Bill Hybels

just have the guts to respond in faith, repentance, and obedience.

About the Author



Bill Hybels is the founding and senior pastor of Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, Ill., and chairman of the board for the Willow Creek Association. The

bestselling author of more than twenty books, including *Axiom*, *Holy Discontent*, *Just Walk Across the Room*, *The Volunteer Revolution*, *Courageous Leadership*, and classics such as *Too Busy Not to Pray* and *Becoming a Contagious Christian*, Hybels is known worldwide as an expert in training Christian leaders to transform individuals and their communities through the local church. Hybels received a bachelor's degree in Biblical Studies and an honorary Doctorate of Divinity from Trinity College in Deerfield, Ill. He and his wife, Lynne, have two adult children and one grandson, Henry.