



WILLOW CREEK COMMUNITY CHURCH
MESSAGE TRANSCRIPT

BIG QUESTIONS OUR WORLD
MUST ANSWER, PART 1:
CAN WE GET ALONG?

BILL HYBELS

REV. JAMES MEEKS
(Salem Baptist Church, Chicago IL)

1/19-20/08

Racial reconciliation—what will it take for people of different ethnicities and color to get along? In this Q&A message, pastors of the largest black church in Illinois and the largest white church in Illinois share their experiences from their two vastly different backgrounds and current settings and speak to the structural inequities and systemic oppression experienced by non-whites. The point is made that reconciliation is going to be most effective when it starts not through political or social organizations, but through the local church—black and white—where God will get the glory.

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WILLOW CREEK COMMUNITY CHURCH

BIG QUESTIONS OUR WORLD MUST ANSWER, PART 1: CAN WE GET ALONG? 1/19-29/08 – M0803

Bill Hybels, Rev. James Meeks

Nancy Beach: For those of you who may not be familiar with Rev. James Meeks, who is here today with his wife, Jamell, I'd like to begin by telling you just a little bit about him. In 1985 Rev. Meeks and his wife established Salem Baptist Church with just 200 members. Under Rev. Meeks' leadership, the church has grown to more than 20,000 members. In 2005 they opened the House of Hope, which seats 10,000 people.

And something else you may or may not know: in 2003 Rev. Meeks became an Illinois state senator. And so in addition to pastoring a church ... you know, Bill, I think you're just a wimp. [laughter] You're not doing a whole government thing on the side, you know [laughter] ... As one of our state senators, Rev. Meeks represents five of the poorest communities in the state of Illinois.

Many of you might not be aware of the relationship that our churches have developed over the past couple of years. Bill has preached at Salem Baptist. And then we began something called the Justice Journey. Alvin Bibbs from Willow's staff and others organized this event where for several days folks from our church and folks from Salem Baptist went together on a trip to the South and visited key sites where events connected to the civil rights movement occurred.

Salem's high school ministry and our high school ministry have visited one another back and forth and partnered some together. I personally am a close friend with their worship arts pastor, Walter Owens, and his wife, Terry. And so there have been many, many different kinds of connections.

But how did this friendship really begin between the two of you? Where did that start?

Bill Hybels: It started a little bumpy, actually. I had heard of Rev. Meeks, had seen him on television, knew that he was very political, but really didn't know about his church that much. And then one time when I was in Europe helping the WCA train pastors over there, there was an event that Willow put on here about racial reconciliation, and Rev. Meeks was invited. I thought it was just going to be the normal kind of event that didn't stir up any trouble. [laughter] And I'm over in Europe somewhere, and my laptop screen lights up with people saying, "There's trouble at home." And I'm wondering what's going on. And they said, "This Meeks guy showed up and he called you out." [laughter]

I said, "What do you mean he called me out? I don't even know the guy." And they said, "In public he called you out." [laughter] So I just kept on with my trip; I wasn't going to deal with it.

Then when I got home, a lot of people said, “So what are you going to do about this? He said that if you were really a committed Christian, you’d do something together as a church or you’d partner in some kind of way.”

And I never got around to it; never heard anything more about it—until we were invited to a lunch together. So we walk into this lunch meeting together—it was about three or four years ago—and I had to get this off my chest. I said, “You called me out.” Isn’t that how it started?

Rev. Meeks: Not only that, but it worked, because we’re here tonight. [laughter/applause] Actually, we met at a Gatekeepers meeting. Some pastors from the Chicagoland area invited all of us to get together, and Bill was there. And I would happen to say that when we met face-to-face, it was love at ... [laughter] We liked each other. [laughter]

First of all, let me say how much indebted I am to Bill and to the Willow family for inviting us here this weekend. This is an opportunity where I think the world will be made better because we’ve come together. I just think the world of Bill Hybels. [applause] And so I am happy to be here.

There’re some crucial issues that we must discuss. But the good news is, whatever we discuss is not of our fault. We have all been born in America, and all of these problems were here long before we got here; and so, hopefully, we can do something to fix some of them. So thank you for inviting us here. [applause]

Nancy: Before we go further, I think some of you may be wondering how real this friendship is, because they’re both pastors of large churches and there are good reasons that they should know one another and at least be cordial to one another, et cetera ... But tell me and tell the rest of us, is this the real deal? Are you guys really friends? [laughter] (To Rev. Meeks) Do you like him?

Rev. Meeks: No. [laughter] Actually, when we got in that room at the luncheon, it appeared as if nobody was there except for us, because we immediately started having a conversation. And I think the thing that struck me most about Bill Hybels is that he brings the best out of you. Since we’ve met, I don’t think there’s been a week that’s passed by that we haven’t had some kind of communication. Even if we were not pastors of large churches, I think that Bill Hybels and I would be friends.

Bill: I’d say the same thing. And I don’t think you can fake partnerships across racial lines very well. You can be well-meaning and all that, but with same-ethnicity friendships or cross-racial relationships, it’s either the real deal or it isn’t. And when I met Pastor Meeks and we went on a couple of trips together, the overwhelming thing that struck me is that this guy is an awesome leader. He is a pure leader.

And I realized when I went to his church—that was before you built the new facility ... If you’ve ever been in the neighborhood where James has built the church that he’s built, I could never have built the kind of church that James has built in that environment. It takes a higher level of leadership than I have to establish a ministry as strong as Salem Baptist in the vicinity in which it’s established. And so my respect for Rev. Meeks and what he’s achieved is very high. And

when we got to know each other personally and our wives got to know each other and our families got to know each other ... it's a very strong friendship and one that I cherish.

Nancy: Well, as we look at this being Martin Luther King weekend, let's dig in here.

Bill, you grew up in Kalamazoo, Michigan. As a white American in that environment, what were your thoughts about Martin Luther King?

Bill: I had almost no recollection or awareness of Dr. King. I'm not proud of it. I grew up in a little Dutch enclave. The only thing I had was a vague awareness that Dr. King led marches, and there was trouble at a lot of those places that he led marches. I'd turn on the evening news and my father would say, "There's Dr. Martin Luther King," and there was a lot of interesting stuff going down. But I went to an all-white church and I went to an all-white school, and I was insulated from the realities of racism so much that Dr. King had virtually no effect on my life.

In fact, I remember one of the first times I went to an African-American church. It was not air-conditioned, and I pulled out the little fan that you wave. I'd been in white churches that had little fans like that, and they always had a picture of Jesus on them. I pulled out the fan at the African-American church, and there was a picture of Dr. Martin Luther King on it. And I was, like, whoa. [laughter] It was totally unexpected. I really just didn't have much of an awareness.

Nancy: Rev. Meeks, what were your thoughts about Dr. King when you were growing up.

Rev. Meeks: I wanted to be him. Dr. Martin Luther King was making such an impact on the world. And, as a matter of fact, when I was 10 years old, I actually met Dr. King. He came to Chicago, and he came to our neighborhood because he was marching for the right for African-Americans to live wherever they wanted to live. He was marching for open housing. At that time, African-Americans could not live west of Ashland. Dr. King said that that was wrong, and so he was marching to break that up.

I also noticed, even as a young child, that Dr. Martin Luther King was not a troublemaker. He had a theory called non-violence, and he said that if Americans were going to all live together, then we shouldn't be fighting. And so Martin Luther King did not allow any of his marchers to be violent. As a matter of fact, if you look at his sermons, if you read his speeches, he was as close to Moses, as close to the real deal, as we would ever get in our lifetime. He was a godly man; he was a preacher; and he led non-violent demonstrations. And the reason he was so successful is because he led non-violent demonstrations. Everything he did was rooted in the Gospel. [applause]

Nancy: Now, Bill, I've heard you say that you had a second conversion kind of experience when it comes to race. Can you explain what you mean by that?

Bill: Yeah, I think I've talked about this one other time for the Willow congregation. But most of us who know Christ in a personal way think back quite clearly to when it was that we stepped over the line of faith and asked Christ to be our Savior. That was like our first conversion or regeneration, redemption—theologically. I just think the Bible teaches, and it's the experience of

many of us, that between the point of your first conversion and when you go to heaven, it's quite possible that God is going to touch your heart in a profound way about a number of different issues. Some of them are social justice issues. Some of them are family issues. Whatever.

But about seven years ago, I was going on a sailing vacation with my family, and Alvin Bibbs gave me the book *Divided by Faith*. The family would go to bed at night, and I'd dig out that book. And all I can say is that I had one of those deals where God just rocked my world about race. It was unplanned. Nobody could have programmed that or tried to push that on me. And the best way I can describe kind of what happened in the reading of that book—and I hope everybody will consider getting a copy; it's the best book I've ever read on race—but here's the deal: I was just this Dutch, white guy who felt that if I was okay in my relationships one-on-one with people of color, then I had no further responsibilities in the whole racial issue in the world.

And I had a lot of friends across racial lines. Good friends. I did not consider myself a racist in any way. One of the high values in our home when we were growing up is you had to respect everybody. And yet when I read *Divided by Faith*, I was—and I say this to my own embarrassment because I had a college education and a year of seminary—I had never really been confronted with structural inequity and systemic oppression, and so I was exposed for the first time in my life to the fact that we don't have a level playing field when it comes to blacks and whites, that something happened in our history that tilted the playing field, and tilted it dramatically. And the effects of it still exist today.

I remember telling you, James, about this one time when we were on an airplane together. I was talking about the effects of social injustice over a long period of time, and you said what whites fail to understand is that if you have benefited from this unlevel playing field, if you have benefited in any way because of how history has gone down, you're responsible to try to address this unlevel playing field and these systemic injustices in the future and try to right them. And I've never forgotten that.

Most of us who are white have benefited from our collective history in ways that we're not even consciously aware of. We've benefited, and we don't feel much of a responsibility. Even though the playing field's still not level, we don't think we have anything really to do about this ongoing systemic injustice. But I've been convicted. I was creamed by this realization that I've got to do more than just be right in my relationships. I've got to do my part in righting the wrongs that still exist in our world about race. So that was my learning in the deal. [applause]

Nancy: Rev. Meeks, Bill described a second conversion. Did you have any kind of second conversion on this issue, or a need for one?

Rev. Meeks: I had an experience. I would say, Bill, in addition to saying that people should right it, I just want them, first of all, to understand it, that structural inequality does exist. I, actually, as a black person, I grew up for the most part believing the stereotype that blacks were shiftless, lazy, didn't want to work, were criminal in nature. So I know that some of you, as a white person, some of you have to believe all that, because I thought that.

I was preaching a series in our church, “The African-American Truth” series, and it forced me to do research on how we got here. And when I looked at the 400 years of slavery and then I looked at the 200 years of Jim Crow laws, it dawned on me that blacks are not lazy or shiftless or don’t want to learn. It’s just that blacks have always had inferior schools. Blacks have always been given low positions on the totem pole. And I said to myself, “Wait a minute. We’re about 600 years behind white people. Six hundred years behind white people, and we have not had the chances that they’ve had.”

I didn’t get mad at anybody. I didn’t curse anybody. I didn’t blame anybody. But I took a deep breath and I said, for the first time, that I was all right with myself and all right with my race. As a matter of fact, I was downright proud of us, to be 600 years behind and almost moving in the right direction. [applause]

Nancy: Rev. Meeks, you grew up in the Chicago area, and I’m just wondering if you could describe a time, something you remember, when you felt the sting of racism personally.

Rev. Meeks: A lot of times.

Nancy: Can you think of one?

Rev. Meeks: You know, something happened to me in Miami, Florida, about a year ago, believe it or not. I was going there to preach for a convention, and the people said they’d be there at the hotel to pick me up at 6:30. So I was excited, and I got down there early and was standing in front of the hotel. A taxicab pulled up, and a lady got out and handed me her bag. She automatically assumed that I was the bellman. And so, I kept it. [laughter] After church that night, I told her where it was. [laughter]

But, believe it or not, we’ve had instances in our lives where my wife and I, we literally had to carry our lunch because we couldn’t eat in a white restaurant. And I remember as a kid going to the movie theater upstairs because the downstairs section was whites only. And I just thought, “Hey, there are better seats up here.”

Nancy: Bill shared the book *Divided by Faith* with me several years ago, and it marked me as well. This book will really stretch your thinking; it stretched mine. I’d like to talk about an equation that is in the book, and I’m going to ask both pastors to respond to this equation. From a white perspective, we would generally say we have all been created equally by God. And then we would say now—maybe not in the past, but now—there is equal opportunity. But there is still disparity. I don’t think any of us would deny that there is still disparity. There is an unequal outcome at the end. So the question is, If we’re created equally and we have equal opportunity, what is the X factor? What is the reason that there is still disparity, vast disparity in many situations?

There are different responses to this equation based on your background and the way you look at the world. And so, Bill, I would like to ask you, especially before you read this book and before you gave it any thought, how would you have answered what the X factor is?

Bill: I'm not sure I would have been able to. But I think even today, if you line up a hundred white folks who have not thought deeply about this situation, I think they would actually say, "Yup, created equal." And they would actually say there is equal opportunity today—which there isn't. There is disparity in the outcomes. But we'll come back to that. I do think if you lined up a hundred white folks who haven't reflected deeply on this, they would say that broken black culture, the absence of black fathers in the homes of African-American families, lack of motivation, lack of application of skill, wanting something handed to them, et cetera, et cetera,. That's what I think a lot of white folks would say.

I don't think that's right. I don't think that's true. I just think if you put this in front of a lot of people who haven't reflected on it, they'd go, "Yeah, created equal and equal opportunity. All this disparity is because they don't work as hard as we white folks work."

Now you have to really deal with this, friends, because when I had my awakening, when I started reading about all this, I was like, "I have been wrong most of my life. I've never really thought critically about this."

James, how would you react to that equation?

Rev. Meeks: If the premise is wrong, you're going to have a faulty conclusion. You say 'created equal' and that's true. That's what Dr. King fought for. He said that since we all are created equal, then we should have equal opportunity. But we don't have equal opportunity. Here in Barrington, there are six jobs for every one person. In Roseland where I live, there's one job for every six persons. We lead the nation in drive-time to work because there are no jobs in our area.

You say 'equal opportunity.' It's not equal opportunity because the educational system in my neighborhood is not the same educational system as in Barrington. Barrington has schools where there are four swimming pools, Spanish labs, French labs, five or six counselors for every so many kids. In my neighborhood, there are no labs. There are no foreign language labs. There are no books in most of the schools. And so I would argue the 'equal opportunity.' Blacks do not have and blacks have not had the equal opportunity or the same opportunity as whites have had.

Bill: We were talking one time, because James has been involved as a state senator with the education issue ... and this isn't going to be something that I'd like anybody to quote because I'm not trying to be absolutely precise, but it's representative ... But let's say that in the state of Illinois, the state provides—and again, this isn't precise—but let's say the state provides about \$6,000 per student in our public education system. Most of you know that in Barrington, because of property values and taxes and so, we have the revenue in our system to be able to add probably \$11,000 to \$12,000 to the \$6,000 the state gives; and so a Barrington education for a kid probably is \$18,000 per student.

Now in Roseland, where Rev. Meeks comes from, because of property values and so, it's very possible you would only add \$2,000 to the \$6,000 that comes from the state of Illinois. So if you spend \$18,000 on a kid in Barrington and have all of the educational opportunities, and have only \$8,000 in Roseland, is this equal?

It's not equal. And over time, this leads to all other kinds of inequalities in areas like access to medical care or housing opportunities. And what I've had to come to terms with is that in so many areas, the playing field is not level.

Now once you get really convicted as a Christian, it's either something you address or it's something you walk away from. But knowledge is trouble; and when you know, then you're on the hook. It's something that God speaks to you about. And again, you don't fix this problem by just loving someone of another color. You can love people of any color and ethnicity, but if we don't as a Christian community level this unevenness in all of its manifestations, we're going to have ongoing tension, ongoing racial strife. If this unevenness were flipped and we white Creekers lived in a community that had the scenario of inequality going on all around us, we'd have some problems, I predict. And this is what's troubling me more and more these days.

Nancy: Rev. Meeks, it is said that at 11:00 A.M. on Sunday morning, you look across our land, and it's the most segregated hour of the week. Can you comment on that?

Rev. Meeks: That is because people tend to worship with folk that they have relationships with. You go to the health club with people that you know. You go to dinner with people that you know. You go out to the movies with people that you know. And you go to church with people that you know. This service this weekend would be impossible without relationships. We were not here two years ago. It was not until Bill Hybels and I got to know each other and really got to know each other's heart. And the members of our churches have gone together on Justice Journeys, and they have gotten to know each other. This weekend is built out of relationships.

When you know people, you tend to do more things with them. Not only that, but then you tend to not judge them. We're different. We worship different than white people worship. I'm learning in my comfort zone to not judge you for the way you worship, and I hope you don't judge me for the way that I worship. But I hope that we are important enough to each other that regardless of the way we worship, we just have to get together and start worshipping, because we worship the same God. [applause]

Bill: I've actually come to believe that the extent to which we just worship with people who are like us, our worship is diminished. I really do think the church is enriched by its diversity. A few weeks ago on this stage, we did an opening worship song in Spanish led by Hector Hermosillo, our Casa de Luz Spanish-speaking ministry leader. I was enriched by attempting to sing in Spanish. [laughter] That was not an imposition to me, and I didn't stand there and think, "Who's dragging Spanish into our service?"

Revelation 7 has that majestic kind of vision where it says from every tribe and every nation under heaven, people will be gathered before the throne of Christ and they'll be pouring out their hearts in worship. I read that passage recently, and I thought, "That's what I wish Willow were like before heaven," that we would be enriched by greater numbers of people from different ethnicities and backgrounds and colors and languages, because you look at the handiwork of God and you look at that diversity and you say, "This is an expression of our great God here." When you have unity amongst that kind of diversity, that's something only God can do, and the world knows it.

Nancy: Bill, you and others have been raising the value of racial reconciliation now for several years. What changes have you seen around Willow? Do you see any progress?

Bill: I am very, very proud of our church. Extremely proud of Willow. When I gave the first message on this seven years ago, there was a little pushback. I remember standing around after services and people were saying, “Why are you dragging this issue into our church?” And seven years later, we’ve gone from a diversity factor at Willow of two percent to 20 percent. [applause] And that’s just in seven years. We have friendships with churches of all kinds, and we’re becoming more reflective of a diverse community. I brag about you folks all over the world, saying that you have responded to the Word of God, you have responded to the work of the Holy Spirit.

Now we have a long ways to go. I still think there are folks who come to our church sometimes who don’t feel as welcome as they should. My challenge that I’ve said to you on many occasions is that those of us who know Christ and love him deeply should be the first person in every social setting to reach a hand across a racial line. Every time, we ought to be the first people. [applause] And I think we’re becoming that.

Rev. Meeks: You know, Bill, we have a long way to go, but what a great start. What a great start this weekend for us to leave our church and to have been invited to come here. And if it’s going to start, if we’re going to have racial reconciliation, who do you think that God is going to allow to do it? If the government does it, if a political organization does it, if a social organization does it—it’s not going to give God glory.

God is going to get glory when his people, black and white, lay our differences aside, get in a room, and come out loving each other, working on it, working at it, over and over, until we get it right. But it has to be the church. [applause] It has to be the church.

And I have always said—and I want you to hear me well—we have an obligation. Who is ‘we’? Salem is the largest African-American church in the state. Willow is the largest white church in the state. Nothing speaks more than the largest black church and the largest white church forgetting what color we are and realizing we are saved and coming together under the umbrella of Jesus Christ, our Lord, [sustained applause] and worshipping him and lifting up our hands to him and adoring him and giving him the praise and exalting him. That’s what’s going to do it. And America will be made rich because Salem and Willow Creek ... the strong have to bear the infirmity of the weak. And if the two biggest get it right, then the rest of them will get it right.

Bill: You just heard some preaching. Thanks, James.