

## The Hillsong Phenomena

Increasingly we are being asked ‘should we be encouraging people to attend *Hillsong* events or sing their songs in our churches?’ The answers lie in the foundations, theology and now the fruit of this ever-growing movement.

### **The Foundations**

In 1986 husband and wife team, Mark and Darlene Zsech, along with a Pastor Pat Mesiti were leaders in a ‘band’ that outreached to high schools. (Mesiti founded *Youth Alive* and in later years was *Executive Director of Teen Challenge NSW* and *National Director of the Australian Christian Churches*). During those early years the Zsech’s were introduced to Brian and Bobbie Houston’s *Christian Life Centre* in the Hills district, Sydney (an offshoot of *CLC Darlinghurst, Sydney*). There a Geoff Bullock was the director of the music ministry. They combined writing and singing talents and ‘*Hillsong*’ was born. The music gained great acceptance with young people and then in an increasing number of churches throughout Australia. Today there are few churches that have not adopted some *Hillsong* Music.

In the early nineties Geoff Bullock had an adulterous affair and subsequently divorced his wife and married the woman he had conducted the affair with. Darlene Zsech took over his position as ‘worship leader’ at the *Hills CLC*.

In an interview in May 2006, more than a decade after the event, Bullock claims ‘*they stole my soul*’. The interviewer, Jennifer Sexton, of the *Australian*, wrote: ‘*Christmas Eve 1994 was the end for Bullock. He had rehearsed the choir and band to play the standard church repertoire for three Christmas services. Just hours before the first service, Houston discovered Bullock had not rehearsed traditional Christmas carols. ‘He just tore me to shreds and then left me to do three services’, Bullock claims. The partnership ended that night...Bullock claims that when he departed, a campaign of whispering about his morality and sexuality filtered throughout the church. When he broke up with Janine a few months later, his subsequent relationship with a married woman (whom he later married) was, he says, twisted to become the reason he had been forced out. At the same time, Houston preached about dark forces intent on undermining the church. ‘They ran a huge campaign to discredit me’, fumes Bullock*’. (1)

The problems for *Hillsong* continued - in 2002 Pastor Pat Mesiti was asked to leave the ministry during a highly publicised exposure of his adultery. Brian Houston, *Hillsong*’s senior pastor, at the time said, ‘*This whole area of sex abuse and predatory behaviour is devastating...*’ (2) But Mesiti is only one of many in such organisations as *Hillsong* and *Youth Alive* who have fallen. In an interview with the *Sydney Morning Herald* newspaper Brian Houston admitted to disciplining up to five of his pastors each year for sexual misconduct.

In less than three years Mesiti was back in ministry being advertised as a motivational speaker. Today he tells thousands that gaining money and fame is a Godly pursuit.

The formation of the *Assemblies of God (AOG) Christian Life Centre* movement, where *Hillsong* originated, was arguably formed in deceitful circumstances. Letters issued by AOG New Zealand (21/12/01, Wayne Hughes, General Superintendent) and AOG Australia (24/12/01, John Lewis Assistant President) disclose that Frank Houston, formerly head of *CLC Sydney*, was disciplined in 1999 for ‘*serious sexual offences*’ (NZ letter) that occurred 30 years ago. At least one offence was against a teenage boy. Frank denied the charges for more than 20 years before admitting his guilt. The New Zealand letter banned Frank Houston from AOG platforms in that country.

While the matter of Houston’s fall was known in 1999 it had only been openly acknowledged by the AOG at the time when Pat Mesiti’s moral fall was publicised.

In 1977 Frank Houston moved permanently to Australia from New Zealand and established the first assembly in Oxford Street, Darlinghurst, Sydney. The problems in New Zealand, the sexual offences and charges of paedophilia were not made known to the ever increasing number of his congregants. In 2002 after having risen to prominence in the Australian AOG, this information surfaced and was openly reported. It was left to his son, Brian Houston, by now the National Superintendent of *AOG*, to publicly discipline his father and relieve him of his duties. (3)

## What Do They Teach?

*Hills Christian Life Centre* is known by many as ‘*Hillsong*’, as the music being produced and recorded there has developed into a great commercial success. The theology emanating from this Pentecostal movement is also unashamedly ‘Word of Faith’ and ‘Prosperity’ teaching.

‘Word of Faith’ was initially founded by Kenneth Hagin and propagated by Kenneth and Gloria Copeland. These people are demonstrably false teachers and false prophets. The false teaching includes heretical teaching on the Deity of Christ and the Atonement. (4) The false prophecies of these leaders are too numerous to mention in this short article but documentation of many of them are freely available. (5) The Word of Faith ‘jesus’ is manipulated by a force of faith contained in words to give healing, money and success. Its leaders, (Copeland, Hagin, Joyce Meyers, etc), many who have been speakers at *Hillsong*, teach that their jesus went to hell and was tormented by demons for three days as part of the atonement. They also confuse or deny the deity of Jesus while on earth. Of course they may not teach these things while speaking at Conferences such as those held at *Hillsong* but they nevertheless have taught these things in their books and audio tapes.

As head of *Hillsong*, Brian Houston also teaches a full blown ‘prosperity’ doctrine that holds to the belief that God is willing to be controlled into blessing His people with large amounts of money commensurate to their giving. (6)

His sermons spend much time in teaching a ‘giving to receive’ theology. The outcome of this is great accumulation of wealth amongst the leaders and thus *Hillsong* has become a multi-million dollar enterprise.

There is no doubt that *Hillsong* (or the attendees that give the money?), perform many good deeds. The church has numerous charitable ministries such as *Mercy Ministries*, (a home established by *Hillsong*’s Darlene Zschech for pregnant girls or those with eating disorders) and *Hillsong Emerge* - to help people find jobs and recover from addictions. Thousands of children in Uganda are also sponsored; and *Hillsong* gave \$500,000 to victims of the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami.

On the negative side - *Hillsong Emerge* has been accused in Federal and State parliaments of misappropriating millions of dollars worth of Commonwealth grants. Also Houston failed to declare that he and his wife Bobbie had sold some personal property holdings to a *Hillsong*’s *Leadership Ministries Incorporated (LMI)*, of which Brian is a director. *LMI* is the tax-free entity *Hillsong* set up to help pay the Houstons’ income. In breach of Office of Fair Trading reporting rules, no financial statements had been lodged since its inception in October 2001. Only after the property deals were uncovered by *The Australian* were the accounts filed in August 2005. The Houston’s incomes did not show how they as a family could afford property worth \$1.738 million over 12 months. (7)

At *Hillsong* much time is spent on teaching about prosperity and giving. Brian wrote and published a best selling book titled ‘*Want More Money?*’. As the money buckets are passed around at each meeting, the audiences are informed that credit card facilities are available, and cheques should be made out to *Hillsong*. *The Australian* wrote: ‘*The buckets have holes in the bottom, presumably to discourage parishioners from giving coins...[But] the rivers of cash keep flowing: donations and salary tithes to Hillsong were \$15.3 million in 2004; merchandise, CDs, books and DVDs, returned a further \$6.93 million, while total church revenue has now passed the \$50 million mark - all tax-free thanks to Hillsong’s charitable status. The message of Hillsong’s prosperity gospel is: the richer you are, the more you can help others*’. (8)

*Hillsong* has become a platform for a wide range of ecumenical church leaders, faith healers and prosperity teachers, many who are heretical and false prophets. The wide scope was evident at a recent Conference (July/2006) when neo-evangelical Rick Warren took the stage, and was followed by radical Pentecostal Reinhard Bonnke, sharing the same event with his brazen display of ‘tongues’, prophecies and healings. At this Conference Bonnke ‘*promised married couples who were barren that they would be holding their own baby in their arms in nine months time. He promised cures for cancer, for people with damage to their spines, and those suffering from rheumatoid arthritis. He asked us to stand and place our hands on the parts of the body where we were sick or on the top of our own heads, and promised that we were healed and that our life spans were returned to normal. The fact that he himself wore*

*glasses at all times before, during and after these sessions seemed to matter little to him or the audience?* (9)

This same evangelist has fraudulently claimed to raise people from the dead and healed thousands. Investigations by various ministries and by Christian doctors have exposed this man as a signs and wonders fraud. (10)

Then there is Darlene Zsech, who no doubt is an attractive and dynamic song leader, singer and motivator for *Hillsong*. However, her presentation has been described by one Christian magazine as ‘*sentimental, incoherent, and rather light on content - that it was all anecdote, misquoted Bible verses, oversharing and assertion...*’ (11) This quote sums up much of *Hillsong* teaching which majors on topical sermons with a shotgun approach to the use of scripture. Very often the scriptures used simply do not convey what the preacher is emphasising. The pre-sermon repetitive beat music also minimises the level of discernment of the hearers. The music captures hearts and emotions well, but does not well prepare the mind to discern truth from error.

We in this ministry are increasingly noticing youth who are copying this *Hillsong* style of presentation and whose speech is fast, erratic and jumping from one thought to another. This ‘hype’ of *Hillsong* may have youth jumping and proclaiming ‘jesus’ but where is the depth that is needed when the tribulations and trials of this life hit home?

The lack of a doctrinal base is worthy of serious consideration! Such doctrines as the Cross, the Blood, the Judgement of God, the Sinfulness of Man, the pursuit of Holiness (and thus Separation) and the systematic exposition of the Scriptures - all these are hardly evident in *Hillsong*. When sin is spoken of, and this is not often, it is spoken in psychological terms such as negative thinking and attitudes that destroy God’s purpose in *our* lives, and limit *our* potential. There is little or no message that sinful humanity is under God’s wrath and condemnation because of our personal rebellion against Him. *Hillsong*’s doctrinal foundation does not allow for the Biblical connection between sin, death and judgement. One writer who went to the 2006 Conference stated: ‘*...not a single example was found expounding Jesus’ death as taking the penalty for sin on our behalf so that we might avoid God’s wrath on judgement day...They do not proclaim Jesus death as a substitutionary atonement, turning aside God’s wrath so that I can receive forgiveness and be saved on the day of judgement. The Gospel is not preached. Its content is not expounded. Its great terms and concept are not taught or explained. Whatever is driving the bus, it’s not the Gospel*’. (12)

## **The Music - Is There a Link?**

Is there a link between the *Hillsong* music and the sinful lifestyles and aberrant doctrine amongst the leaders?

There is a rising tide of voices expressing concern over a rebellious attitude reigning in many of our youth who frequent such events as *Youth Alive*, *Hillsong* and other Contemporary Christian music events. Australia’s youth in general are already rebellious, self-centred and hate authority. Rock music arguably reflects this rebellion.

*Hillsong* ‘worship’ services at times resemble a nightclub and the sensuality displayed from the platform is hardly Godly and holy. Many of the lyrics are about ‘us’ and not God and promote a worldly ‘love affair’ with Jesus. The ‘mosh pit’ at the foot of the stage of some events would do credit to a Jimmy Barnes concert. Any ‘gospel’ that might be preached at these events is nullified by the effect of the emotional and associated music displayed.

Just how close the music and the performances of *Hillsong* Conferences are to the world is illustrated by this early testimony: ‘*The sound hits you like a wave. The bass is throbbing. The drums kick through your diaphragm with each beat. The guitars thrum and swell. The lead singer is a good looking guy with unkept hair and stubble. He stands arms raised, head thrown back. The crowd moves and sways like a rippling sea. We roar. We sing. We stomp. Two guys stand next to me in leather jackets and dreadlocks, repeatedly pumping the air with their fists. They look at each other, and one mouths the word, ‘awesome!’ Loudspeakers flank the stage and rise up above the crowd in curved banks. Images flash and morph in sync with the music on billboard sized video screens. As each verse of the song leads*

*towards the anthemic chorus, the momentum builds. The rhythm drives us forward. The chorus arrives in a rush of sound, and sweeps us on. The singer holds his mike towards us and gets us to sing. We belt it out. The year is 1988 and U2 is wowing them at the Sydney Entertainment Centre. Bono is on stage telling us how much he loves this town...[Now] Almost every detail is the same, except that the lead [Hillsong] singer is saying how much he loves Jesus...[this] at the Hillsong conference at Sydney...* (13)

There is clearly a lack of distinction from the world, (Rom.12:2; Eph.2:2; 1Jn.2; James 4:4). We would challenge anyone to listen to the music, watch the performers and read the lyrics of *Hillsong* music and honestly say that it does not mimic the beat, the fashions and even the thinking of this world. If that is not evident to Christians who would read this, then why is it that the *secular* world sees *Hillsong* ever so clearly as their own, as is shown in the following quotes?:

*'Every weekend at Hillsong churches in Sydney 19,000 people sing, clap and jump through a two-hour tribute to a God who rocks'* (Jennifer Sexton, senior writer *The Australian*) (14)

*'...Most people attending, and everyone appearing at the conference, looked irredeemably 'hip'. The young Asian woman in front of me in Bonnets workshop actually wore a clinging, rather revealing outfit as did many of her fellow delegates...she nodded approvingly as Bonnet said he would happily borrow from Kylie Minogue's latest CD cover for ideas on how to promote Hillsong's Darlene Zschech, the music pastor whose Christian rock CD's have sold more than five million copies worldwide...A men only workshop did hear about how men need to control their sex drive and that masturbation is the first step to sexual dysfunction, but most of the presentations were...not especially heavy on theology either. Instead they tended to be of the motivational, self help, 'Seven Habits of Highly Effective People' type, as easily applicable to those building an environmental organization as to a church...' (Weekend Australian, 9/10 July, 2005).*

It is sad that the secular world sees *Hillsong* as it really is and often describes it accurately, yet Christians are blind as to just how much *Hillsong* is of the world! Sadly in many things *'...the children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light'*, (Lk.16:8).

Paul put no emphasis on worldly methods but on the power of the message itself, (1Cor.2:1,4; 1Thess.2:3-5). We in this ministry are not against all 'charismatic' or lively music, such as 'choruses' that present sound doctrinal lyrics. However, when the rhythm dominates the music, when the noise level is so loud as to drown out voices, (is God deaf?), and when it becomes sensual, fleshly, repetitive (hypnotic) and *worldly*, then the line between flesh and spirit has surely been crossed! Yes, such organisations as *Youth Alive*, *Planet Shakers* and *Hillsong* will bring in the numbers and many will make 'decisions'. However, these 'results' do not prove anything! Should not our music and our youth meetings be *distinct* from the ways of the world. They should be holy and uncompromised.

Some years ago the Christians in the Soviet Union issued a plea to the west: *'...freedom is bringing another great harm to our churches. This damage is coming from Christians who are sending rock music and evangelists accompanied by rock bands...We are embarrassed by this image of Christianity...We abhor all Christian Rock music...it is true that rock music attracts people to church but not to Godly living...do not desecrate our teenagers with it. Even the unbelievers recognise it is unholy music and they cannot understand how American Christians can be so much like the world. We call this music from hell.'* (15)

Godly music surely should not have a beat that overrides the melody; but *Hillsong* emphasizes the rhythmic beat, which many believe will naturally lean more towards the flesh.

With the music there is too an 'image' that is portrayed by *Hillsong* and its performers. Many believe there is an overt sexuality. This is well underscored by the teachings of 'Pastor' Bobbie Houston. Her three audio tape series *'Kingdom Women Love Sex'* (later renamed *'She Loves and Values Her Sexuality'*) have been popular in the largest Christian bookstores. These teachings set out to explain why she feels Christians should be good at 'it'. Such things as 'pelvic floor exercises' and 'orgasms' are discussed. Those who carry too much weight to be attractive she sees as 'retards'. She says: *'We need to be good at sex ourselves so that if the world happens to come knocking we can tell the story of God in our lives,'* Bobbie says, on the tape. *'Without being lurid or untruthful - hello! - we can say [she whispers], 'I have a great marriage and a great sex life' - wink wink, nudge nudge. Yeah, truly.'* Bobbie also offers some practical advice. Fat is out...*'If I carry weight I feel like a retard...How are you going to do anything to*

*surprise your man when you need a hydraulic crane just to turn over in bed?’ Have plastic surgery, if it makes you feel better and it is for the right reasons, and ‘girls, pelvic floor exercises - can you believe I am saying this? - you know, I have heard that orgasm is not as strong if you are really sloppy in that area’.*

The primary market targeted for the *Hillsong* merchandise and concerts is our precious youth. On questioning a group of young people who attend *Hillsong*, the unanimous answer to our question ‘How did you become involved in this Church?’ was - ‘the music!’. The authors have personally met non Christians who frequent *Hillsong* events because of the music and entertainment factor alone.

The most frightening thing about what Christians think of *Hillsong* is that many simply do not see the music as pandering to the world or the flesh. The doctrine is accepted as it stands - a toxic mixture of truth and error. One only has to listen to their CD’s or read the lyrics to discern that much of the music and the live performances are so close to the world and far from ‘holy’. Again, the proof of this is that many of their recordings reach the top of secular charts and are regularly advertised on commercial radio and television. One observer at the 2006 Conference stated: ‘*Of the two hours or so each of the 14 rallies throughout the week, around half the time was a rock concert, led by Darlene and an array of special guest singers...The crowd seems to thrive on it. As each rally opened, an impromptu mosh pit would form at the front*’ (16)

One reader wrote to us about such a typical Conference and highlighted the need for discernment: ‘*I was attending a four day ‘Planet Shakers’ Conference in Adelaide with my church’s youth group, eager to learn more about God and to grow in my relationship with Him. At first, the conference seemed to be like many of the Christian functions that I had attended in the past: loud music, dynamic preachers and young Christians like me coming together to worship Jesus. However, as the conference progressed I began to notice certain things that didn’t ‘sit right’ with me. I noticed, for instance, that there was a nightly half-hour ‘sermon’ emphasizing the importance of giving as a primary means of obtaining material blessing from God...the worship was unashamedly ecstatic and repetitive, and there were altar calls and mass ‘conversions’ or ‘healings’ in nearly every session. Even more unbelievable, though, was the attitude of the conference’s director, Russell Evans: at one stage he said that he could ‘demonstrate the power of the Holy Spirit’ simply by throwing a towel at someone who would subsequently fall over! I was shocked at this outright blasphemy, but I was even more shocked at the response I got from my youth pastor, who, when told of my concern, said that Planet Shakers was a ‘perfectly normal Pentecostal conference’ and that I should just ‘chew the meat and spit out the bones’. I was also deeply concerned about the fact that I was the only one out of my entire youth group who had a negative experience of the conference! In fact, I was so distressed about being the only one that I no longer felt like a part of the group, and as a result I began to question my faith. Did I really know who God was? If this was the one true God, then why did I suddenly feel so distant from Him? Why did I no longer want to worship Him? It was at this point that I decided to search for the truth: I took a break from church and began to earnestly pray and study the Word of God for myself. However, I was still pretty upset by the Planet Shakers experience, and so found this to be incredibly difficult: so much so that I came dangerously close to giving up on the faith altogether. The only thing that gave me hope was, in fact, an [audio tape] testimony from your ministry of being delivered from the movement...I identified with so many of the things mentioned, and was relieved to find that there was someone else out there who felt the same way. You confirmed my suspicions about the movement...I worked up the courage to leave the offending church, which I now realise is deeply involved in both extra-biblical revelation and the ecumenical movement. I am currently seeking a new church...I admit my reluctance in committing for fear of being contaminated by false doctrine all over again...’ (17)*

Why is the church seeking to ape the world? The very word ‘church’ comes from the Greek word ‘*ekklesia*’ which means to be ‘called out’ of the world. Why does the world increasingly love the music being played in many churches today? Why are many Christian singers recently making it big time on the world’s music charts and being signed up to the world’s best secular record companies?

In the middle of the 20th Century, Tozer wrote: ‘*Religious entertainment is in many places rapidly crowding out the serious things of God. Many churches have become little more than poor theatres*’. When Tozer wrote this the entertainment factor in churches had only just become noticeable on a broad

scale. Would Tozer be able today to tell the difference between the world and the church?

Should we sing *Hillsong* songs? Do we not promote *Hillsong* in some measure when we sing their songs? Does not *Hillsong* benefit financially when we do so? Is not the music the entry point into *Hillsong's* aberrant philosophy, doctrine and teachings? Do we not compromise God's theology when we sing the songs? Is it not enough that the fruit of *Hillsong* has been adultery, sexual deviancies, broken marriages, thousands of spurious conversions, making merchandise of their hearers and false doctrinal teaching? How can we willingly allow our children or ourselves to attend these events such as *Hillsong*?

*Hillsong* is taking our youth and the church closer to the world and Rome with its thinking and methods. Brian Houston recently spoken at a US conference at Robert Schuller's apostasy riddled church - and shared the platform with Roman Catholic priests speaking there. The church is called to be separate, holy and '***the pillar and ground of truth***', (1Tim.3:15). We urge parents, teachers, Pastor/Elders and readers to stand against *Hillsong* where necessary.

This article will be seen by many as 'blunt', 'unloving' and 'judgmental'. It is indeed one of our strongest articles to date. But it is time to publicly warn people of a movement that at best is shallow 'feel good' Christianity and at worst a movement that is taking the church into grave apostasy and ecumenism. *Hillsong* has degraded moral standards, it has changed the face of Christian music and presented songs that barely have any sound doctrine in them, it has altered the attitudes of our youth and it is a melting pot of false teaching and false prophecies.

The 'jesus' that *Hillsong* presents is not the Jesus of the Bible. He does not teach, as *Hillsong* does, that miracles will be the forerunner of a world wide end time revival; or that unknown 'tongues' is the evidence of the 'Baptism with the Spirit', (*Hillsong* adheres to this error as an *Assembly of God* church).

The ecumenical jesus that *Hillsong* encourages focuses on love and avoids truth, doctrine, sin and the wrath of God - all vital ingredients of the gospel. The ecumenical jesus is into union at the expense of truth. It says Catholicism is Christian and counts 'decisions' as salvation.

But the real Jesus is non-negotiable on holiness and separation from the world, sin and error. He does not accept mixtures ('leaven') or false teachers and prophets.

The real Jesus teaches us to '***present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God***', (Rom.12:1,2).

### **Terry Arnold & Mike Claydon**

- (1) <http://www.signposts.org.au/2006/05/04/high-cost-of-faith/>
- (2) Kelly Burke, 'Religious Affairs' Writer *Sydney Morning Herald*, P.8, March 27/2002
- (3) *Diakrisis Australia*, May/June 2002; *Sydney Morning Herald* 27 March 2002
- (4) See our papers 'Word Faith Movement - A Closer Look' and...
- (5) 'False Prophecies, Revelations and Teachings'
- (6) *Diakrisis Australia*, May/June 2003, P.9,10)
- (7) <http://www.signposts.org.au/2006/05/04/high-cost-of-faith/>
- (8) Jennifer Sexton, senior writer, *The Australian*. <http://www.signposts.org.au/2006/05/04/high-cost-of-faith/>
- (9) 'The Briefing', Jan/2007, P.13
- (10) *Diakrisis Australia*, various articles free on request
- (11) 'The Briefing', Jan/2007, P.11
- (12) Ibid P.16
- (13) Ibid P.11
- (14) <http://www.signposts.org.au/2006/05/04/high-cost-of-faith/>
- (15) Peters & Rychuk, Unregistered Union of churches, Moscow, Nov/91
- (16) 'The Briefing', Jan/2007
- (17) *Diakrisis Australia*, Sept-Oct/2003, P.7