

**BOBBY GRUENEWALD, FOUNDER, YOUVERSION BIBLE APP
INTERVIEW WITH DR. RICHARD (RICK) J. GOOSSEN* AT
ELO WORLD CONFERENCE, TORONTO, CANADA, NOVEMBER 18, 2015**



INTRODUCTION TO BOBBY GRUENEWALD

Bobby (@bobbygwald) is passionate about exploring new ideas and finding practical ways to leverage them for the global Church. He serves on the Leadership Team at LifeChurch.tv as the Pastor, Innovation Leader and founder of the YouVersion Bible App. Working with lead pastor Craig Groeschel, LifeChurch.tv has shaped a missional approach to technology, seen in initiatives like Church Online, as well as the Bible App and the Bible App for Kids from YouVersion. Just six years after its launch, the YouVersion Bible App has been downloaded and used on over 200 million devices on nearly every smartphone and tablet in every single country on the earth. Bobby believes this generation has the potential to become the most Bible-engaged generation in history.

Adhering to a strong belief that churches can accomplish more working together, LifeChurch.tv has also created a suite of free tools for church leaders including Open resources, Church Metrics, the Church Online Platform, and Develop.Me. Gruenewald is one of the leading voices in the Church on innovation and the use of technology to reach people for Christ. He frequently writes and speaks on the topic, and has been featured in the New York Times, Washington Post, NBC Nightly News, TechCrunch, CNN, CBS, Stanford Business Magazine, and more. He was also named to Fast Company's list of the Most Creative People in Business.

Prior to joining the LifeChurch.tv team in 2001, Bobby started and sold two technology companies and consulted with startups and venture capital funds. These entrepreneurial endeavors began while he was studying Finance at Southern Nazarene University as he worked with several alumni to launch a web hosting company. Bobby and his wife, Melissa, met while growing up together in Central Illinois and married while both were attending SNU. They have continued to spread their roots in Oklahoma and currently live in Edmond with their four children.

Bobby received the Entrepreneurial Leaders Award on November 18th at the ELO World Conference in Toronto, Canada. The Entrepreneurial Leaders Award is presently annually by ELO to an individual who is an example of a Christian entrepreneurial leader making a difference on a global scale who inspires others in word and action. Past recipients have included the following international leaders: Graham Power, Power Group, Cape Town, South Africa (Vancouver, 2012); Mark Burnett & Roma Downey, Hollywood Producers, Malibu, CA (Vancouver, 2013); Datuk Edward Ong, OCK Group, Singapore (Vancouver, 2014); and Lord Robert Edmiston, I.M. Group, London, UK (Vancouver, 2015).

*This interview was edited by Dr. Richard (Rick) J. Goossen, Founder & Chairman, Entrepreneurial Leaders Organization (rick@entrepreneurialleaders.com).

INTRODUCTION TO BOBBY GRUENEWALD AND LIFE CHURCH

R – You wear many hats. What’s your position and what do you do?

B – My title is Pastor and Innovation Leader at Life Church, based in Oklahoma City, OK (www.life.church). We are a multi-site church with locations in seven different states in the US. My responsibilities are broader than just the YouVersion Bible App, which is something that I started within the church back in 2006. It has been this humbling journey that we have been on where God has done the unexpected. This next week we will pass 200 million unique devices that have installed the YouVersion Bible app.

R – Let me stop you there. That number is so big it might not register immediately with everyone. If someone thought of having a business, developing an app, putting it online and getting it downloaded even 10,000 times, that would be incredible. But

to get something downloaded 200 million times, that is phenomenal.

Describe for everyone how you function within your church. What is Life Church and what is the relationship with the YouVersion Bible app?

B – At our church we are very evangelistic in our approach. The church is just about to turn 20 years old in January and the church has grown from a handful of people to over 70,000 people attending per weekend.

R – So just to clarify, that’s 70,000 over how many campuses and how many services?

B – We have 24 locations in Oklahoma City and surrounding suburbs and, I think, a total of about 140 services. There is as many as eight services at any given location on a weekend. It doesn’t feel like you are coming to church in a stadium. It feels like you are coming to a church of 700 people.

R – Describe how YouVersion fits into the Life Church context, just to give people a sense



of what your church is about. How does a church birth something like a YouVersion Bible app?

B – A church is made up of the people that are a part of the church. It is less about the institution and more about the people. So what we do as a church is really a product of who the people are that come to our church. I was one of those people that was attending the church. My background is in business and technology. Our church is passionate about reaching people. We have this phrase that we will do anything short of sin to reach people for Christ and occasionally we might actually cross the line.

We take a very entrepreneurial approach to how we reach people. Almost all of our leaders are former business people in terms of our backgrounds. We are people whose lives were changed or impacted by the church and so we transitioned into these roles of leading the church. In fact, our core leadership team has been in place for 17 years now. We were all probably among the first 1,000 people that attended the church.

We feel that we are alive at a really unique time in history. This has been on my heart personally and I shared it with the rest of our leaders and they embraced this concept. If you look at the explosion of the global population and look at the time that that is happening, it is almost straight up like a hockey stick during this segment of history that we occupy. It didn't happen at any other time in human history. At the exact same moment in time that that is happening we have this explosion of tools and technology that have the potential to knit this population together like never before in history.

When we feel called to lead people to Christ you can look at the alignment of those two things and say that God could have placed us here anytime on this timeline, but he chose to place us here during this time. You could say it is a huge responsibility or huge opportunity. We actually say it is a huge responsibility. We feel like we are compelled to leverage these tools and this technology to reach people in this time. So as a church missionally we feel called to do this as part of what we do as the mission of our church. That is the reason that YouVersion, as well as a handful of fairly significant technology related projects, are part of what we do as a church.

R – I find it interesting that business people who attended the church chose the church as a vehicle to pursue these missional purposes with entrepreneurial excellence and with their entrepreneurial gifting. What seems to happen in a lot of churches is that people pursue their calling primarily through para-church organizations. So talk about why you didn't just set up a separate para-church organization, but rather you are actually doing this through a church and what was the nature of the church that actually welcomed you to do it?

B – I was in business at the time that I came to the church with my wife. We had moved to a new house that we built in northwest Oklahoma City and we wanted to find a church home that was close to where we lived. Life Church was the very first church that we walked into and we instantly fell in love with what God was doing there. You could look down the rows at the church and, it is hard to describe, but you could just see life change in people. You could visibly see how God was working in the lives of a lot of broken people and that resonated with us.



We were already believers at that time but we had never been in an environment or a culture that had such a richness of that experience. The church was extremely low-tech at that time, too. The air-conditioning was our best technology and that barely worked. So I wasn't drawn to anything that would resemble some approach to ministry that was high-tech. I was just drawn to the passion of the church to reach people and drawn to what God was doing there. That was the same thing that drew the others that are a part of our team.

What is interesting about it, though, is that I had a background in music in high school and we got plugged into the church pretty quickly. We joined a small group. The leader of our small group was the worship leader. He found out that I played keyboard and asked if I would volunteer to play keyboards on the weekends. So I would do my entrepreneurial business thing with the extreme number of hours that that involves during the week, and on the weekend I would spend up to 12-13 hours every Saturday and Sunday volunteering to play keyboard between practice and playing.

So here I was every week: I was very connected to the church, loved using that gift, but not a single time had I ever considered that what I was doing in business had any application to ministry. I had viewed the church as something that fed me and then I would go and use those lessons in understanding my family and business. I never thought that the technical skills or the learning in business had any application in ministry. Then I sold my company. An article came out in the newspaper about the sale of the company and it had my picture on the front page of the paper. The executive

pastor of the church said, 'isn't that the guy who plays keyboard on the worship team?'

That led to a lunch conversation where he asked me the question: what do you plan on doing next? I said I would probably start another company. I had already done that twice, and I said I am not sure exactly what. He asked, would you ever consider coming to work at a church? I said no. Then he changed the question and said, 'would you consider coming to work at our church?' I thought about it and said no. It had nothing to do with money or some of the typical reservations that people might have. I love my church and I was afraid that if it became my job I might not love it anymore.

The point is that this lunch meeting was the first time I had ever even connected the dot that what I was doing in business even had any application for Kingdom specific goals.

R – That is an interesting point because many entrepreneurs are disconnected from churches and don't feel welcome in churches to utilize their market-proven gifts in that context. In fact, when we have interviewed over 300 Christian entrepreneurs almost all of them would say that it was their friends and family that encouraged them--hardly ever the church or a pastor. So typically no one from the church recognizes those gifts and therefore entrepreneurs find para-church organizations that they get involved with. So in your case the fact that the pastor approached you, is quite outside the norm.

B – I will give you some context. His background is that he was an executive at Target, a US retailer, and he left that career to become an executive pastor here when it was a small and fledgling church. He came to the church when it was just a couple hundred people. He was just attending and



the founding senior pastor [Craig Groeschel] sought him out and said I really need somebody around me that thinks in a business like way and has this experience. But his particular experience at Target was hiring and talent development and people. Here he was all of the sudden in a position at the church and that is what led to him seeing the article and saying, here is something.

R – That is quite an interesting concept that you have an executive pastor who was a former executive at Target. Was it the founding pastor who had the foresight to hire an executive pastor with that business background?

B – Yes, the founding pastor who is still our senior pastor is an incredible leader. He gets a lot of accolades for his teaching ability but his leadership ability is an even greater strength. Part of it is that he has this ability to do what is not very intuitive for most leaders and that is to bring people around him that think very differently than he does and really empower them in a way that is somewhat unique. So he is not at all challenged by having CEO-type people around him in positions of leadership whereas some people would say I don't want to have anybody in that type of role. He is not at all threatened by that in any way. He invites a real level of discourse and discussion and feedback. The way we describe it is that he models this because he delegates authority and not responsibility. He says that I am going to have people around me where I really have hired them for who they are and the way they think, even if they think differently than I do. I am actually going to empower them with authority to be over this area, not just simply with responsibility, which in many ways is saying I want you to do this the way I would

do it, but I am going to give you the responsibility to do it. Really our culture and the church has been shaped by the type of servant leader and the type of leader that he is.

YOUVERSION BIBLE APP!

R – So let's talk a little bit about the YouVersion Bible app. Let's talk about how the idea first came up and what the genesis of it was.

B – One of my strengths is ideation. So I am full of ideas. But one of my other strengths is an activator, so I like to actually do things. I don't like to just theorize about things and just think about ideas. So for whatever reason my ideas tend to come when I am in movement, when I am travelling, when I am driving, when I am flying. I don't know what it is with me. Everybody kind of has different places where they are creative and for me that is how it works.

I was in the O'Hare airport in Chicago in October of 2006 and I was in probably one of the longest TSA security lines that I have ever been in. It was one of those lines where it goes back and forth and back and forth and then you turn the corner and then there is a whole other set of lines. You thought you were at the end and then you find out that you are just beginning! And so it was there in that TSA security line, and I have no idea what prompted this, but I am standing there thinking, if we could just leverage the technology that we have today, perhaps we could be at one of those pivotal moments in history where it could change not just how this generation engages with the Bible, but generations to come. This would be not unlike how the printing press transformed



the last several hundred years of our access to Scripture. I know that is a really big question to be asking in the security line—but that is what I was thinking.

So the initial idea for the YouVersion came there in the security line. Now most people know the YouVersion as an app that is on your smartphone or your tablet. Probably few people would know that YouVersion actually started as a website, but that is actually what the initial idea actually was. It had some novel concepts and features that I won't take time to talk about, but the reason that none of you know that is because when we launched the website in 2007 none of you went to that website! Nobody else did either. It was pretty much a failure right out of the gate. The biggest reason that it was a failure is because I was honestly a below average Bible reader. I had the desire to engage in Scripture more but I just could never develop the right rhythm or habit or discipline, whatever you want to call it. So I was very much creating this concept for me, asking if there was a way we could leverage technology in order to make the site work well. This website didn't change the way I engaged with Scripture. I would use the website but only because we created it and I was forced to but not because it was something that naturally helped me.

We are not afraid to try things and then shut them down. It is just part of the process of innovating and creating and so probably about three months in, after trying a few iterations and small changes to it, we recognized that this was not something that had natural momentum. It was not accomplishing what we hoped it would, so in early 2008 I made the decision that we were going to shut it down.

As part of that process I like to evaluate why something failed. I don't want to just move on and move past it without understanding why. So we began to process some of the reasons that we thought it failed. One of the key reasons was that we were using our computers less, much less, and so it wasn't natural for us to just connect to our computers. We were using our BlackBerrys all the time. Back in 2008, we realized that part of the challenge with why it was unnatural was that we were having to force ourselves and the time we wanted to use it we weren't in front of our computer. So we thought that understanding that, why don't we make a change. Let's just redesign it so that it could very simply be displayed on the screen of a Blackberry. Back then Blackberrys were really simple in terms of their screen.

I was a bit skeptical as to whether that would really work because the Bible feels like such a big book with so many words and the Blackberry screen doesn't seem like that. But we did that and very naturally without having to make a lot of effort to it. I began to more naturally engage with Scripture because it was just a part of this device that had been integrated into my life. Our traffic began to go up on the website from people using it on their Blackberry.

It was right at that time that Apple announced that they were going to make it possible for you to develop apps for the iPhone. Some people may not remember but when the iPhone launched, and for the first year, you just had the set of apps that came with it. You didn't get to download apps. They didn't have an app store. Then about a year later Apple announced that they were going to do an update to the software but they were also going to create



this thing called an “app store” and make it possible for people to develop apps.

So based on what we saw happening with viewing it on the screen of this Blackberry I thought, well, let’s build an app for the iPhone. We had no idea how to build an app, nobody on our team had done that before, so I found a 19 year-old on our team who loved Apple. Those were about the only two requirements you had to have back then: be 19 years old and love Apple.

As a part time project we sat down and worked to build this Bible app. We thought what if the Bible could be one of the very first apps available in the app store? Perhaps people who weren’t even looking for a Bible would see it and be interested in it. We submitted it to Apple in June of 2008 and had no idea how many apps there were going to be. We had no concept of that. Sure enough Apple approved it and it was in the first 200 apps available in the app store the day it launched, July of 2008. And that was a Thursday evening and the very last day, I shouldn’t have been doing this, but I was reading an article on my phone as I was driving down the road—there are now laws against this, but at that time there weren’t—and the article was about some company that made it possible for you to get these analytics for these new iPhone apps. You just put their code in the app and it would help you get information back on it. I called the team and I was like, can we put this code in our app? It was the day before we were submitting our app to the app store. They said sure, let’s do it. Had we not done that we wouldn’t have known the impact because there was no data you got from Apple back then, it was just a black hole.

That was Thursday night and by Sunday morning, because of these analytics, we were able to see that 83,000 people had installed the app on their iPhone just in three days. It blew our minds! We had no idea, and not only did they install it, but they were using it. They were opening the app multiple times a day. The same thing we saw on a small scale with Blackberry all of the sudden we were able to see on a much bigger scale happening. I am an activator, so what was the part time project Friday for that 19 year-old became his full time job on Monday morning when he showed up to work because we had to accelerate it.

We have now been on this journey from 2008 until today and we raced to get it available on any mobile platform. It is on any smartphone or tablet platform in the world. You can download it and it has moved from just a handful of versions that we had available to I think over 1,200 versions of the Bible in over 880 languages.

R – For people who aren’t familiar with the YouVersion Bible app please describe what exactly it does in its present form, the number of Bible reading plans and translations.

B – It is an app that is completely free. It is designed to help you engage with Scripture daily. That is really the emphasis of the app. You can do that by reading the Bible in one of those 1,200 versions and whatever language you might want to read it in. You could also listen to the Bible read to you via the audio Bible feature which I use every day. You could watch Scripture through a few partners that we have that have created video representations of Scripture. You can discuss Scripture with a network of friends that you establish within the app (it is limited



in size because we want it to be a set of trusted relationships that you have). You can share Scripture using social media, SMS, those kinds of things. That happens approximately 300,000 times a day; people are sharing passages on twitter, Facebook and social media. One of the features is that there are daily reading plans, like devotional reading plans that connect you to Scripture each day and those are really popular. They are growing rapidly. We have about 1,200 plans in English; they cover a variety of topics. They are anywhere from 3 - 4 days long to 365 days long. Last year we saw about 8 million of those plans completed. This year we will pass 20 million plans completed, so the growth rate of that is really popular.

R – Can you describe when the Bible app launched, how many Bible translations were part of it and how you developed that?

B – One of the things I did not know when I was in the airport in 2006 was that other people owned the Bible. I didn't know that. It is a good thing we figured it out before we launched the Bible app because otherwise it wouldn't have been well received. Some people don't know that but the Bible translation work, particularly in English and some of the more widely-used languages, generally major publishers who have invested, in some cases, millions of dollars to do the translation work. Their expectations are that they will receive a license fee. So we faced that challenge right out of the gate. We had no relationships directly with any of those publishers or rights holders and so the first challenge was figuring out how to talk to the right people and then, secondly, to convince them to let me give their text that they charge for away for free.

When we first started, after me going and trying to make a case for what we were doing, we had one publisher that agreed to license their text to us. It is possible they weren't really clear about what we were doing and just did it on accident. I don't know. I didn't try to deceive them, but I wasn't sure if they understood either because they agreed. It was one of those things that surprised us in a positive way. We also had about five texts that were public domain texts that had been out of copyright that most people wouldn't want to read, but we had them available and used them. So we started really with just one popular version, the Modern Bible Text. Once we saw the initial results it was a matter of how to convince everyone else to do this.

R – What about the best-known translation of them all, the King James version?

B – In the US regarding the King James people would say that it was a public domain version. Only later did I come to understand, because I have been corrected by some of our British friends, that it is under Crown copyright. This means the Queen of England maintains this copyright in perpetuity for all the Commonwealth. We are not in the Commonwealth so that helped us, but in deference we actually list it as under Crown copyright.

R – The obvious question is how do you make money or at least cover your expenses? Who funds it and who owns it and the relationship with the church?

B – YouVersion is actually a part of Life Church; it is not a separate entity. Most people don't know that because we don't ever use the app to promote our church. The app is intended to get people engaged in Scripture. It is not designed to grow our



particular church in any way. It is funded initially by our entire church. It is part of our budget. We allocated at the beginning a very small amount of funds to the app and then as it grew we allocated more funds. Then some Christian business leaders that I knew came to me and asked if there was any way they could help accelerate the growth of the app.

I said sure. I have experience in business so I put together a plan of how we could accelerate growth if we had more resources. I presented it to them. They have funded a portion of our budget ever since then. I don't have anyone who does donor development or spends any time raising money. We have the church today that gives a significant amount annually and then we have outside donors that fund the rest of it. I have designed it so that if all of the outside funding went away one day, for whatever reason, we could more than sustain the operations of it. So the rest of it is fuel on the fire—it is about growth and acceleration.

R – How many employees do you have?

B – Right now I think we have about 29 full time employees and about 400 volunteers. We provide the app in about 45 languages. We provide the Bible text in 880 plus languages. We provide tech support in a dozen languages. If you receive an email from us in English it is likely that people receive that email in 15 - 16 languages. We have volunteers that manage the whole translation process and tech support.

R – So with 200 million downloads you only have 29 full time staff?

B – Correct.

R – And then 400 volunteers—these are primarily through the church?

B – The volunteers are primarily through the app, not the church. It is people who are using the app who are bilingual in a particular language and want to help provide support. There are some volunteers through our church, but primarily the volunteers come through the app. As well, most of our developers and our 29 staff came from being users of the app. They left whatever job they were doing before, some worked on the space station doing development, and they wanted to work on something bigger than space, so they came to work on the Bible.

R – What do you see as the future of the app? Do you see evolving it to a stand-alone entity?

B – No. If we ever felt like that was a barrier to it being successful and engaging in Scripture then sure we would set it up as a stand-alone entity without question, but it hasn't proven to be an issue. There is so much I could go into about how it benefits from being a part of the church and how God has used it.

R - Would you see monetising it?

B - No. As a church back in 2006 we felt called as leaders to give all our intellectual property away for free to other churches and ministries for them to use. We have removed our name from our intellectual property; no attribution is required. So we have been resourcing pastors and church leaders this way for almost 10 years. That has changed our heart around generosity. We really feel that that is something we want to do with the Bible app.



The Bible publishers are really the heroes of the story. This was a tension point early on, but to their credit they really as a whole industry have embraced the concept of the app. Part of the commitment on our part is that this is a non-commercial arrangement. They publishers bought into what we are doing and so anything like monetising would be a big shift. It wouldn't be well received or consistent with what we sold as the vision.

LESSONS LEARNED

R – What have you learned by being a business person working with the church and what are some lessons you have learnt through this whole process?

B – I think the biggest thing I learned early on is that God gave me a lot of unique experiences in business as a very young business leader, 20-24 years old. We had a multi-national company that was birthed out of a dorm room and we had lots of things going on. We had bad experiences as well, lots of challenging times, but I have learned that God doesn't waste any of those. If you let him use you and are obedient to his direction for your life, he takes every last little piece of these experiences and weaves them into his plan for your life.

I resisted my particular calling at first, but it was clear that God was leading me from this position in business into this vocational role into the church. I know that is not everyone's calling and there is nothing about my calling that is more correct than anyone else's. It is really just being true to what God is calling you to directly.

I wish in retrospect I had connected the dots earlier, that the things I was doing in

business would have Kingdom impact. I could have just as well stayed in business and made a Kingdom impact without necessarily being on staff at a church. That just happens to be my particular path and calling. I would encourage people to recognize that God is giving you a unique set of experiences, resources, not just financial ones, but in terms of the position of influence and the relationships that you have. If you will sincerely ask God how you can use those for Kingdom purposes, I am confident he will blow your mind with what can be done.

R – To emphasize one point, all of us of course have a calling as business people to use our skills in the marketplace. From your standpoint, given what has happened, what have you learned about calling versus what your prior concept of calling may have been? What is the number one lesson you have learned about God's calling in your life?

B – I have learned it is a step by step process. I didn't know what God was going to do back when I was a finance major in college. To give you some more context, I had a Christian rap ministry when I was in college. I was a rapper. I don't look like a rapper, but I was a rapper! I went to a Christian university and the expectation of me going to that university was that I was likely going to be a religion major and would be a pastor. But when I got there I felt very distinctly that I was to be a business major and that was difficult because there was a set of expectations that others had that I was going to do something different. The perception by those people was that taking a step towards business was stepping away from your calling.

I knew in the moment that this is what God was calling me to. Then step by step as I



traced it back every step of this journey was a matter of trying to listen to God's voice when you are at these points of decision.

So it has been a process. If I had known where I was going to end up today I would have become a religion major thinking that was what I needed to do to take this path. There is nothing wrong with being a religion major but taking the path that God had for me is what created this unique set of experiences to allow me to do what I do today.

I would encourage people to think about calling in a way that appreciates the process and recognizes that God reveals himself in a step by step process without the clarity of what the destination is and being comfortable with that process because for me it is the only way that I would have got here. I would have messed it all up, I am confident I would have, I would have wanted to cut straight to the end and that wouldn't have been the right journey.

SOME FINAL THOUGHTS

R – Do you have any final word you would want to leave with us?

B – The passage in Scripture that strikes me as something that typifies what God has been doing in my life is Ephesians 3: 20-1: ²⁰Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, ²¹to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen." God is able to do immeasurably more than we could ever ask or imagine. He chooses. He doesn't have to do it this way, but he chooses to do it through his power that is at work within us, in whatever context that he

has placed us in. But He doesn't do it so we can receive the glory, He does it so He can receive the glory. He does it through us so He can be seen. I think that is an example of what I have seen God do in my life. I would encourage everyone in the significant spheres that He has placed you to recognize that He is able to do so much more than you think is possible. You probably have a limited view of what God could do through you. But He is only going to do that if you let him work through you and not so that you can be glorified.

When I tell the story of what God has done through YouVersion I like to highlight for people that this is a church in Oklahoma, which is not known as a hot bed for technology. God used a church in Oklahoma to create a technology solution to help people engage in Scripture that is reaching every single country and territory on the planet. I believe that was with intention and purpose. If it happened in Silicon Valley people would say, oh, that makes sense. Or if it happened in New York at a publisher who had tens of millions of dollars, that would make sense.

Instead God chose to use a church in Oklahoma to do it for only one reason and that is so we can't take credit. There is absolutely no way that it makes any logical sense that as smart as our team is, and they are smart, they are not that good. They are really not. So it allows us to tell the story in a way that makes God the centre, not us. It was clearly him. If you would just allow God to use you in whatever your context is I think he will surprise you with what is possible.

R – Great, thank you, Bobby.