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Billy Graham: Life and Legacy

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For over 250 years America has been blessed with a number of committed evangelists, men and women dedicated to preaching the word of God in the effort to convert to faith those who do not believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. The message has never been complex, but it has been delivered with power and authority; and it has been marvelously effective. Indeed, passion has been the defining element of the evangelical method, the hallmark of America's great evangelists into the twenty-first century.

The evangelists who carried the word of salvation to the American people included George Whitfield, Lyman Beecher, Charles G. Finney, Dwight L. Moody, and in the early twentieth century, Billy Sunday, along with hundreds of lesser known preachers. In addition to converting hundreds of thousands of non-believers, these evangelists had a significant impact on the beliefs and practices of churches in America, and on the nation itself. Evangelical Christianity, responding in part to these great evangelists, was largely responsible for the ideology supporting the American Revolution, the anti-slavery movement, the westward migration of white Americans, Progressive reforms, prohibition, and the Cold War.

In the Twentieth century, God raised up a man to take the leading place in this great effort of evangelism. He was not the most gifted theologian, he was not the most dramatic preacher, and he was not the best educated of men. But from an early age, he was determined to serve God as an evangelist, and equally important, he was determined to clean up the image of the itinerant preacher. Too often the twin evils of illicit sex and easy money had tarnished the reputation of evangelists amongst the American people. Indeed, in the early twentieth century Sinclair Lewis' novel "Elmer Gantry" made fun of the hypocrisy of such evangelists.

Then too, by the 1930's, it seemed that America had moved beyond a need for evangelists, for revivals. Many believed - and hoped - the country had moved beyond Christianity. Had not Charles Darwin's theories regarding evolution proven that no god was required to explain human existence? Had not Christianity been demonstrated to be a moron's religion in the Scope's trial? So it seemed to the skeptical; indeed, even many Christians, with shallow roots, allowed their faith to wither.

In November 1935 Billy Sunday, the last great evangelist, died. Indeed, he had been largely forgotten by people in the big cities since the end of the Great War in 1918. Just a year before, a gangly teenager from North Carolina got up from his bench at a small-time [Mordecai Ham] crusade in North Carolina and walked self-consciously to the altar, knelt in the sawdust, and publicly gave his life to Jesus Christ. His name was William Franklin Graham, and he would become the second greatest evangelist ever, after the Apostle named Paul.

Billy Graham was born to Frank and Morrow Graham on Nov. 7, 1918. The Grahams were a Scotch-Irish Bible believing family. As a boy Billy was highly energetic, but not notably studious. Nevertheless, Morrow scrubbed the gospel into her son. As she washed the lad in the family washtub she had him memorize scripture. The first one she taught him was John 3:16:

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”

Believing that state universities were the devil’s playground, Morrow wanted her boy to go to Wheaton College. But the family could not afford Wheaton. Billy eventually went to Florida Bible Institute. Billy believed that one could not choose to become an evangelist; God would have to call him. So he prayed often and long, and he walked a nearby golf course in the evening and he prayed still more. Finally, one night he got down on his knees near the 18th green and prayed, “*All right Lord, if you want me, you’ve got me. I’ll be what you want me to be, I’ll go where you want me to go.*” At that moment, God answered his prayer and called him to preach, to be an evangelist.

Graham continued his education. He would stay in school for years to come; he left FBI and later graduated from Wheaton College. But while he was in school, he answered God’s call. He had a ministry, he preached. He preached on street corners and in the doors of taverns, he preached in school services and in jails, and on Sunday afternoons he and a young gospel quartet went out to the local dog track and held several afternoon services. He became chaplain of a large trailer park and preached Sunday evening there. He preached and he practiced. He was passionate, he was dramatic, and he was sincere. From the beginning, and this defies any easy explanation, his preaching touched people’s hearts. More people responded to his calls to Christian faith than was common amongst his fellow student evangelist friends.

In 1945 Torrey Johnson persuaded Billy Graham and a number of others to join Youth for Christ International, a non-denominational organization devoted to evangelizing the young people of America. Billy Graham became the organization’s field representative and chief evangelist. He organized local chapters of YFC and preached. Word of Graham’s powerful preaching spread and YFC became an important youth movement in the post-war era. Now in his late twenties, thousands now came to hear the young evangelist preach.

Graham and YFC consciously made the decision to appeal to youth at as many levels as morally possible. Graham wore the youth fashions of the day, colorful suits, loud ties. The rallies themselves featured entertainment and testimonies from famous people and lots of music.

In the post World War II era, and as the Cold War became ever more ominous, YFC Crusades were overtly yet sincerely patriotic. Billy Graham observed, “*We used every modern means to catch the attention of the unconverted and then we punched them right between the eyes with the gospel.*”

In this methodology, Graham followed the great evangelist of the 19th century, Charles Grandison Finney. Finney, contrary to most Christians of the early 19th century, believed that revivals could be created by human means, that they were not entirely the mysterious work of the Holy Spirit. In other words, if gifted preachers followed basic business practices such as good advertising, good organization, good preparation, successful crusades could be launched. Both Finney and Graham were criticized by Christians and non-believers who believed their crusades were undignified, simplistic, commercial manipulations of people.

However, Newspaper baron William Randolph Hearst appreciated YFC’s patriotism; both Graham and Hearst were ardent Cold Warriors. And Hearst also

approved Graham's emphasis on personal morality. And he realized that Graham was drawing large crowds. Clearly the American people were interested in what YFC was doing. Hearst assigned a sympathetic reporter to do a story on YFC and Graham. Hearst owned newspapers all over the US, Graham was on his way.

In 1947, the Graham team that would bring salvation to millions had been formed. Cliff Barrows was master of ceremonies; George Beverley Shea was the soloist, and George Wilson the organization man. The team seemed always to be preaching somewhere. Gradually the Graham ministry expanded beyond YFC and focused on the American people as a whole. Later, in emulation of John Wesley, Billy Graham's parish would be the world. But the "world" was in the future. In 1949, the Billy Graham risked everything and brought a crusade to sophisticated Los Angeles. Would a southern boy preaching old-time religion be successful in LA? Or would he be laughed at and ridiculed? Graham wasn't sure; the Hearst Papers in California were willing to give a positive spin and plenty of advertising. But what of other newspapers? Graham prayed and decided to go ahead.

The crusade was an astounding success. Originally planned for three weeks, the crusade went eight. A handful of famous people, athletes, movie stars and even a gangster made decisions for Christ. *Time* and *Life* magazines ran stories, and newspapers all over the country covered the crusade. Louis Zamperini, one of the great American track stars of the prewar years, and in the war, a prisoner of the Japanese, made a "decision for Christ" in L.A. that probably saved his life. In 2010, Laura Hillenbrand told his amazing story in her book *Unbroken*, which Angelina Jolie put on film in 2014 [there is also a 2015 film *Captured by Grace*].

The LA Crusade attracted 350,000 people, of whom 3,000 made public decisions for Christ; and, crucially, 700 churches supported the crusade. Also, while conversion to Christ was the goal of the Crusade, it is probably true that Graham's impact on believing Christians, on the maturing of their faith and devotion, was as important as his evangelistic work.

After LA, Billy Graham was on the verge of leading not only a revival in America, but an evangelical ecumenical movement. Leaving LA, Graham took the train east to his Minneapolis base. Conductors and passengers treated him like a hero; reporters surged on board at every city to interview the now famous evangelist. In Minneapolis, while reporting on the campaign to a group of supporters, Graham faltered, overcome with emotion, and had to sit down. He was overwhelmed with the direction his life had taken and admitted to a friend that this is "way beyond me." He was thirty years old.

What was the message that was in the early stages of capturing the hearts of millions of people? The essence of a Billy Graham Sermon included the idea that the signs of the times suggest the imminent fulfillment of Mathew 24. The world is a sinful place and getting worse. From the perspective of the mid-twentieth century, it seems Graham was correct, the world is becoming a more sinful place in many if not all ways. The increase in egalitarianism, in democracy, which is another way of saying an increase in importance for what the common person thinks and does, and even buys, has a very dark downside. People without Christ are slaves to passions and sins of all kinds. And in a mass consumer culture those passions and sins are encouraged and exploited through marketing in ways not possible before the mid-twentieth century. This marketing itself

degrades the common culture and personal behavior both follows and creates the marketing. So yes, Graham was and is correct, the world is becoming more sinful as a side effect of greater significance of the average person and greater communication technology. Nor has the world moved past the passions, greed, and lust for power of many of the world's leaders. It is entirely likely that the world is moving ever closer to Armageddon.

When he was not emphasizing the idea that world events suggested the quick return of Jesus Christ, he preached about personal morality, or immorality, how people had made life more difficult for themselves or destroyed their own happiness. In either case, whether the listener was moved to escape a disintegrating world or a collapsing life, Billy Graham had the answer. Only in Jesus Christ could one be saved whether from God's judgment on the world or from one's self destruction. What, then, did one have to do to be saved, to escape judgment, to fix one's life? As Jesus told Nicodemus in John 3, one must be "born again." Well how does one do that? Believe in Jesus Christ, that he was the Son of God and would forgive your sins if you asked him to. But how does one do that? Graham made it clear, if not easy. The same thing that made the decision for Christ difficult also made it meaningful. One becomes born again by getting up from one's seat, coming forward, and praying with him for forgiveness and salvation.

Graham not only had a method in his sermons, but in the tradition of Finney, he had a system, a program for making a successful crusade. It was crucial to have the support of as many local churches as were willing. These Christian people would form the bulwark of the volunteer staff that would fill the ranks of the choir, offer counseling to those who committed themselves to Christ, serve as ushers, and clean up the mess that large crowds always created. They also provided financial support. Most importantly, hundreds of these local people, and others across the country, committed themselves to pray for every aspect of the crusade. Finally, the Graham team honed the advertising strategy that was so essential in bringing people to the crusades.

In 1952, Graham consciously changed his style. Indeed, historian William McGloughlin argues that 1952 marked "the turning point in Graham's career." Graham became more diplomatic, more sophisticated, and dressed more professionally. In addition, his message, while still emphasizing the necessity of the born-again experience obtained by grace through faith, was directed at all ages, classes, and races of Americans. McGloughlin is again helpful, "The strident political [conservative] overtones of his sermons gradually softened, ... his sensationalism decreased." With this clear Gospel message, good publicity, and friendship with President Dwight Eisenhower, Billy Graham became the most important and successful evangelist in the modern era. In addition, his ministry went beyond American borders and became international.

His impact on the Christian church has been profound. He has led many fundamentalists to a more tolerant view of their brothers and sisters in Christ, and focused attention on the core of the gospel message as opposed to the minutiae of doctrine. Moreover, he recognized that there were men and women in the mainline Protestant churches, and in the Catholic Church, who loved Jesus Christ as he did. Thus Graham helped create a unity amongst Christians that had been severely lacking. He helped found Gordon-Conwell seminary in Massachusetts, and supported Fuller Seminary in California. He was also the guiding hand behind the mouth piece of evangelical Christianity, the magazine Christianity Today.

Graham's impact on the US cannot be measured. From lowly history professors in the PNW to presidents, from college students to senators, Billy Graham has changed lives. Nor was he silent in the midst of the great Civil Rights movement of the 1950's and 60's. From the early fifties on he preached against racism. Beginning in 1953, he insisted, and remember he was from the South and drew much of his support from that region, he insisted that his crusades be integrated; whites would sit with blacks, come forward with blacks, and pray with blacks.

When Billy Graham was in college, he completely gave his life to Jesus Christ. He wanted to be an evangelist, but he did not know if that was God's plan. He waited until he got the call, then he started to fulfill it. Once having set his hand to the plow, he never looked back. Since then, his life has been one continuous harvest of God's fields.

Billy Graham passed away in February 2018. For most Christians, it was an emotional loss. For many older Christians, his death marked another large step into a future we do not wholly accept as our culture seems to descend ever more quickly into depravity and incivility: the kind of depravity Billy Graham preached against.

Most of us who lamented Graham's passing and appreciated his life would agree with Theodore Weld's epitaph of the great 19th century evangelist Charles Grandison Finney. Weld wrote:

...but, yet, take him for all and all, when shall we look on his like again?

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