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BILLY GRAHAM TOURS THE GDR

by Bill Yoder

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Billy Graham toured the German Democratic Republic, October 14-25, 1982, accompanied by a team of advisors, musicians and technicians. This was followed up by an unexpected tour of Czechoslovakia, October 28 to November 3. Graham's hastily-organized tour covered most regions of the GDR, and, except for the initial and closing service, churches were overflowing. Approximately 24,000 persons attended the seven public services.

Church response was somewhat mixed. In Görlitz and Stralsund, Graham was cordially hosted by the local Lutheran bishop; in Berlin and Dresden though, the response was more reserved. The modest number of adamantly pro-socialist Christians never did participate in his services; suspicions concerning Graham's past still run too deep. Considering Graham's vast number of supporters and detractors, it would seem a minor miracle if a service were less than well-attended. A GDR-Party official described Graham aptly as a "legend". And legends, be they living or otherwise, attract legions.

1. Graham's History in Germany.

Billy Graham's sudden appearance in the GDR had many of its citizens' minds reeling. Until recent times, Graham was portrayed by GDR media as an example par excellence of Western aggressiveness and arrogance. This visit was not his first personal appearance before an East German audience. Prior to the sealing of the Berlin border, he had held a crusade in West Berlin's Olympic stadium in 1954, followed six years later by another located in a massive tent erected in close
proximity to the Brandenburg Gate. GDR police had then closed the border for several hours in an attempt to keep their own citizens from attending.

Hermann Kant, today the prominent head of the East German writers' union, composed an article published shortly thereafter. Kant claims in it that Graham, with arm stretched eastward, had called out, "Could it not be that God will also inflict upon you the invasion of a foreign, godless, atheistic and materialistic power?" Kant goes on to brand Graham an "offering-plate Goebbels" and the ushers as persons "who had aided other masses, say 20-30-40 years ago". His Berlin hosts should be driven out of town for "sanitary" reasons. This article resurfaced in a book of Kant's essays published in 1981. But today, it is only West German periodicals who still repeat the Germans' favorite nickname for Graham, "God's machine-gun."

A major turning point occurred in the GDR in 1979 when Graham's interview with the magazine Sojourners, entitled "A Change of Heart", appeared in the church press. His correspondence with Karoly Toth of the Prague-based Christian Peace Conference had also been published. Graham's appearance at the Moscow Peace Conference in May, despite White House objections, finally opened state channels for a trip to the GDR. He had a long standing unofficial church invitation to visit there.

2. Chronic Shortcomings.

During the GDR visit, the chronic weaknesses of the patent Billy Graham style were once again apparent. Contact with "common" parishioners was negligible. Some local organizers expected evangelistic break-throughs, disregarding the fact that Graham's whirlwind tours and one-night stands are much less conducive to such results than the month-long campaigns of yore. As I had also experienced in Poland in 1978, the invitation--especially in translation--remained nebulous, resulting in hundreds of confused persons raising their hands; moments usually duly recorded on film by the cameramen of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association. Despite hundreds of raised hands in Görlitz, only a dozen searchers remained behind for further counsel.
Numerous listeners complained that Graham's messages were lacking a clear train of thought and expressed insufficient comprehension of the local situation. One of the more serious blunders was his repeated reference to "this wonderful nation." Non-Marxist East Germans never refer to their own segment of the erstwhile kingdom of Germany as a "nation"; the GDR is for them only a government, a political entity.

The financial wealth, technical prowess and independence of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association tended to overwhelm host church institutions. Matters which the GDR church had never accomplished—for example, live TV transmission from one church building to another—were achieved within hours by the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association with state cooperation. This led to unfair suspicions concerning a supposedly dubious relationship between the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association and the Marxist state.

Though Graham was officially a guest of the largely Baptist Federation of Evangelical Free Churches, he was treated as a virtual state guest by CDR media. In fact, church and state tended to compete for access to Graham. He was feted by top-notch state officials such as Klaus Gysi, State Secretary for Church Affairs, and Horst Sindermann, a prominent member of the politburo.

At a session of the Dresden Lutheran synod attended by Graham, Dietrich Mendt, a well-known church official and playwright, criticized him sharply for traveling throughout the land in a large limousine under police escort, staying in expensive "Interhotels" requiring payment in Western currencies, and appearing daily on national television as a guest of the state, rather than as a preacher. "When you come to us here, try and come as one of us," Mendt scolded. At the closing press conference on October 25, Gerhard Thomas of Schwerin noted that Graham's hotels "did not coincide with our usual standard for ecumenical guests." Graham responded unrepentantly, that "I did not choose Hotel Neptun, but would certainly choose it again if I had an opportunity. I would like to have stayed longer."

Semantic problems remained. At the same press conference, Graham assured the assembled journalists that he never discussed political issues with politicians. He illustrated this by recalling a dinner.
conversation with Lyndon Johnson, at which his wife kicked him in a successful attempt to impede his response to a political question. Yet two minutes later, Graham stated that he would be conveying his impressions on his conversations with GDR officials to appropriate American politicians.

As is his custom everywhere, Graham--the perennial solicitor--assured all at the conclusion of his visit that "we have been received warmly everywhere" and that the number of worshipers "exceeded all expectations . . . You will long remain in our memories."

3. The Peace Issue.

The present East-West climate would make an American evangelist's trip to the GDR appear highly unlikely. Polemics are heated on both sides, and the subway station at Berlin-Alexanderplatz features political placards strongly offensive to the sensitivities of American tourists. Yet the GDR government appears to remain strongly interested in detente; recall, for example, the visit of chancellor Helmut Schmidt in December, 1981. Given that the usual political channels are blocked, the GDR appears to be making an appeal to the American people by way of a detour through our church institutions. This I consider to be a major reason for the GDR state's interest in Graham. The peace activities of American churches are deeply appreciated and closely monitored by both church and state.

In addition, stratification between the peace agendas of church and state in the GDR has increased during the past year. State propaganda insists on bedeviling Western military efforts in its assessments of the peace struggle; the church stresses mutual guilt and the urgency of mutual self-criticism. Given that Graham would not be taking sides publicly on this discrepancy, some local Christians surmise that it was hoped he would thereby bring state and church closer together. If in fact Graham's visit has improved the church-state atmosphere slightly, then he has dealt the people of the GDR a good turn.

That the evangelist was feted as a de facto state guest, was irritating also to Western journalists. The West German press continued
its traditional barrage against the oh-so-American Graham. The conservative \textit{Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung} asserted, that after his failures on home turf, "the communist states of Eastern Europe are now discovering his talents." The leftist \textit{Tageszeitung} claimed, "Had he not so readily offered his services, the SED (Communist Party) would have needed to invent him." West German TV portrayed his sermons as "without practical value" and suspicioned that he was "a guest eagerly tolerated by the state." A reporter for \textit{Sender Freies Berlin} informed me that he would do his best to "finish off Graham."

It was only the East German media, as well as segments of the West German evangelical press, which presented Graham with roses. Daily reports in most GDR newspapers indicated the progress of his travels and usually showed him being hosted by party officials. The party organ, \textit{Neues Deutschland}, captioned one report "United for the Cause of Peace" and quoted him as being impressed by the will for peace of the entire GDR populace. Graham stated in a sermon, that 99% of the world's people desire peace, but he thwarted all efforts by Eastern and Western journalists to coerce him into specifying the proper methodology for attaining world peace.

When Westerners insisted that Graham comment publically on sensitive GDR issues such as the denial of an alternative, non-military program for avowed pacifists or the controversy surrounding the swords-to-plowshares emblem, he would plead ignorance. On GDR issues, Graham described himself as "still in the first year of school" and adamantly refused to comment on specific political issues, once refusing even to entertain a question concerning his eschatological understanding of Israel.

One can therefore conclude that the accusations of the Western press are largely unfair. Comments which could be construed as offensive to the vast majority of peace-loving Americans have not come to light. Americans should not forget that Graham is not responsible for the captions utilized by GDR press. Captions frightening to some Americans are a "price" of meaningful dialogue.

The content and style of Graham's sermons remain unchanged. The sole difference is that each sermon mentions his concern for world
peace. The thrust of his sermons remains personal and individualistic; for it is the human heart which is at the root of all evil. He repeatedly pointed out, that bombs do not explode themselves. In Görlitz Graham did criticize the traditional, fatalistic stance of evangelicals, that "wars will always be with us." "We must do something," he implored, but again without adding specifics.

At the opening press conference on October 14, 1982, Graham had obediently designated proclamation as the primary objective of his visit, posting peace at the bottom of his list of five objectives. But then he gave himself away by deliberating at greatest length on the fifth point. He frequently mentioned his desire to build "bridges of understanding" and confirmed at the close, that he had indeed attempted to listen to and understand the viewpoints of state officials. "We must learn to co-exist on this planet," he stated repeatedly. This reference to dialogue is significant, for the people of God should obviously desist from the utilization of bombs and airplanes as methods of persuasion. In the GDR, the church has no means other than dialogue to persuade the state of its concerns.

The Graham visit was not without its moments of grandeur. In the port city of Stralsund, Bishop Horst Gienke, a man deeply committed to his church, greeted Graham warmly from the pulpit. He then appealed to Graham in a moving way to tell all the people in the U.S., including the president, "that the people of the GDR love their country and do not want Europe to be destroyed by rockets." On a visit to a collective farm near Magdeburg, the farm director introduced Graham's entourage to some of his Christian subordinates and described them as "among our finest workers." In Berlin, Cliff Barrows, addressing at least 1,500 young persons, encouraged them to take a clear stand for Christ in school despite all opposition. Here one needs to remember that Barrows was member of an evangelistic team "hosted" by an atheistic Marxist government jealous of its monopoly on education. Equal tolerance by North Americans in an inverse direction would seem highly unlikely. The GDR government did of course, harbor ulterior political objectives behind its hospitality, but this is a fact of life in the realm of international politics. Attempts to use Graham as an aid in lacerating the West were not apparent.
4. Conclusion.

Frye Gaillard asserts that during Graham's Moscow sojourn, he was "flattered by the charm and attentions of his Soviet hosts--just as he had been, at other times in his life, by the solicitations of powerful Democrats and Republicans." One cannot yet discount the suspicion that Graham's peace efforts might be part of a gigantic ruse to "conquer" previously forbidden territory and heighten still further the stature of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association; i.e. that "Billy Graham can evangelize where no one else can." Yet even if Graham's motives might be less than impeccable--which is usually the case among us mortals--good can still result for Christ's cause and the sake of peace. During cold war periods, it seems much less disconcerting to view Graham hobnobbing with Marxist politicians than with his own president in the White House.

The tendency of a perennial solicitor to both under-state and over-state the truth, perplex the observer's efforts to ascertain when in fact a genuine change of mind has occurred. Graham's repeated efforts, despite rebuttals, to continue up the straight and narrow road of peace, does appear convincing. A Lutheran pastor and pacifist very close to the hub of his church's peace activities, expressed gratitude for Graham's visit. This person, a co-organizer of Graham's visit, noted no undue political rapprochement between Graham and the GDR government, which would have been offensive to the pastor's own political sensitivities.

It was gratifying to witness on German soil the proclamation of an evangelistic gospel coupled with a strong concern for peace. This is assuredly a potent and promising theological package. West German evangelicals are reputed to have been among the staunchest supporters of West German rearmament during the 1950s.

In view of their past differences, the about-face of both Graham and the GDR government is nothing less than courageous. Obviously, constructive change has occurred on both sides. In view of the press vehemence following Moscow, the shell-shocked Dr. Graham has displayed courage in continuing onward. He is to be lauded for not being too
readily frightened of "compromising" himself politically. It is a Herculean task to walk on the tightrope between East and West, attempting to retain access to the powerful in both. At least in this realm, Graham is suffering for a noble cause. Hundreds before him have suffered likewise and been accused of similar infractions. And due to the continuing resistance of numerous GDR church circles including some of the GDR's most loyal Christian adherents, it did require courage for the state to honor Graham.

In short, the boldness of both the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association and the GDR government casts a ray of hope on the gloomy landscape of East-West relations. The struggle for world peace needs all help available, and it is regrettable that not more Westerners are appreciative of Graham's contribution. The Billy Graham Evangelistic Association costs its constituency a great deal (annual budget is 43 million dollars), but the arms race costs every one of us infinitely more.

In the Baptist church in Moscow, Graham was introduced as "thrice-reborn" (reborn in the spiritual, race and peace realms). If a sixty-year-old can experience a third rebirth, is it then too much to hope for a fourth one by a seventy-year-old?