

Billy Graham: A New Kind of Evangelist

The first one to come forward was a round, sensible-looking housewife with thick glasses. She stood as still and undramatic as if she were waiting to be served at the meat counter. The next was an eleven-year-old boy who kept his head low to hide his tears: a thin girl appeared behind him and put her arm comfortingly on his shoulder. These three were joined by a broad-shouldered young man whose machine-knitted jersey celebrated a leaping swordfish, then by a pretty young Negro woman in her best clothes with a sleeping baby in her arms. Suddenly there were too many to count, standing on the trampled grass in the blaze of lights. Some of them wept quietly, some of them stared at the ground and some looked upward.

Above them all stood a tall, blond young man in a double-breasted tan gabardine suit. His handsome, strong-jawed face was drawn and his blue eyes glittered; for a few seconds he gnawed nervously on a thumbnail, and bright sweat covered his high forehead. He was speaking softly, but with an urgency that seemed to tense every muscle of his body:

"You can leave here with peace and joy and happiness such as you've never known. You say: 'Well, Billy, that's all well and good. I'll think it over and I may come back some night and I'll—' Wait a minute! You can't come to Christ any time you want to. You can only come when the Spirit of God is drawing and wooing you ... I beg of you to come now before it is too late. You know you need

Christ in your life. Leave your seat now and come forward. If you have friends or relatives here, they'll wait on you. Whether you're old or young, or rich or poor, white or colored—come quietly up now and say, 'Billy, tonight I accept Christ.' " The Flame Around the World. Night after night in New Orleans' 16,000 capacity Pelican Stadium, this gaunt young man with the Hickey-Freeman clothes and the eagle-sharp manner is bringing men and women down from the packed stands and up the length of the baseball field to make "decisions for Christ." This would be news enough in that tamed but still sin-ridden city of blues and bourbon. But the flame that is searing New Orleans is also burning greater and greater swathes across the whole U.S. and around the world. Billy Graham is the best-known, most talked-about Christian leader in the world today, barring the Pope.

He has preached on the steps of the Capitol in Washington and in the shadow of the Iron Curtain, on Korean battlefields and in Hitler's former stadium in Berlin. In England, where religion has long been in decline, 2,000,000 people last spring came in penitent droves, and 38,447 pledged themselves as converts. Even when they do not understand his language or share his American tradition, people flock to hear him speak short sentences to be echoed in their own language by an interpreter. In Scandinavia, Finland, Holland, Germany and France this summer, 296,600

came. Since 1949, Billy Graham has preached personally to 12 million people and brought 200,000 of them to various stages of Christian commitment.

"I may be just a small item on the back page of heaven's newspaper," says Graham modestly. But on earth he has already got enough newspaper publicity to make both Hollywood and the circus envious. Five full-length movies in which he appears, a weekly radio program, broadcast on nearly 1,000 stations, and a daily newspaper column syndicated in 99 newspapers, keep a steady stream of converts "deciding for Christ" every week. Tycoons listen to him respectfully, and grey-headed clerics sit at his feet. The humble send him gifts, and the great ones seek him out. Churchill invited him to Downing Street, and Eisenhower keeps one of Billy's red leather Bibles at his bedside. By all indications, that is just the beginning of a career that is making this Baptist from North Carolina one of the greatest religious influences of his time.

Billy Is Different. From Savonarola to Billy Sunday, evangelists have exhorted sinners to repentance and preached salvation as a right-now, yes-or-no decision. The hot Gospel played a major part in the making of America, when churches were fewer, distances vast and life hard. But upper-crust Christians tend to regard the sweaty urgency of evangelistic Christianity as frequently hypocritical and always in bad taste. Billy Graham is different.

He preaches with his shirt collar unbuttoned, so that "my Adam's apple can move up and down." Yet he always looks immaculately pressed and groomed. He is surrounded by electronics—a tiny portable microphone to pick up his voice while he preaches (with a wire clipped to his belt loop), batteries of Dictaphones for dictation, the whole Bible on records. And yet he never sounds mechanical and often seems old-fashioned. He unblushingly applies the hard-sell technique to God ("I am selling," he says, "the greatest product in the world; why shouldn't it be promoted as well as soap?"). And yet such eminently low-pressure, dignity-bound clerics as the Archbishop of Canterbury have given Graham their blessing. A farewell dinner given for him in London this spring included 70 peers and peeresses, and even the austere intellectual Manchester Guardian admitted, "He has a holy simplicity."

How does he do it? Billy would be able to answer that one right off, and with deep sincerity: by the grace of God. "If God should take His hands off my life," says Billy, "my lips would turn to clay. I'm no great intellectual, and there are thousands of men who are better preachers than I am. You can't explain me if you leave out the supernatural. I am but a tool of God."

The Conversion. The pious parents of William Franklin Graham Jr. planted his feet firmly on the path of truth and righteousness. His farmer father once gave him a hiding in church with his broad leather belt for fidgeting during the sermon. The day beer was taken off Prohibition, Billy's father went to town and bought a case. Then, in an awesome atmosphere of ritual sacrifice, he forced Billy and one of his sisters to guzzle bottle after bottle until they were sick. "It was awful," recalls Billy. He has never touched it since.

He was born 36 years ago in a weather-boarded log house on a farm near Charlotte, N.C. Billy Frank, as everyone called him, began milking when he was eight on his father's prosperous, 200-acre dairy farm, getting up at 3 a.m. to do it. But when he was 14, he went tooling about in the family car any time he wanted. "I was pretty wild in those days," he confessed once. "All I

thought about was girls and baseball." But the girls he thought about and dated were "good" girls. "I never touched a girl in the wrong way, and I thank God for it."

In 1934, Mordecai Fowler Ham, a fiery-eyed, long-fingered Kentucky revivalist, began to blaze away at Charlotte from a tabernacle on the edge of town. Billy Frank Graham somehow sensed that he was a sitting duck for Mordecai Ham, and carefully stayed away. Finally, at his mother's urging, Billy went to the tabernacle with his good friend, Grady Wilson. For a week the two boys quailed under the gimlet gaze of Mordecai, who seemed to be searching out their most secret sins. Then they joined the choir so they could stand behind him, but there was no hiding place. After the second week, Billy gave up. Quietly, he left his seat and walked down to stand in prayer, with Grady Wilson right beside him. "I opened up my heart then," he says, "and knew for the first time the sweetness and joy of God, of truly being born again."

Nobody seemed to see any particular change in Billy. The only foretaste of his future pre-eminence came in the summer after high school, when he became a Fuller brush salesman. He not only outsold every other salesman in North Carolina but the district sales manager as well.

After failing at Bob Jones College, Billy went to the Florida Bible Institute near Tampa. Still, he might never have become a preacher—his marks at the institute were poor—if he had not met Emily Cavanaugh.

Decision on the Golf Course. Emily was as beautiful as she was good, and Billy fell head over heels in love with her. Things seemed to be going well enough between them until one October night, when she told him that she wanted to marry a servant of God who would do big things—and it was clear to her that Billy would never amount to much. Instead, she had decided to marry a fellow student who was going to Harvard Divinity School.

Billy was desolate. That night he prowled the school golf course praying and weeping, and at last made a fateful decision: he would devote his life fulltime to God.

To get preaching practice, Billy began at a Tampa mission for derelicts, drunks and dope addicts. His first church sermon came on Easter evening in 1938, and was a dismal flop. But Billy went on practicing—mostly exhorting the fish and alligators of a nearby swamp to leave their evil ways and be saved. He preached his first real revival at the Baptist Church of East Palatka, Fla. in June 1939. Halfway through the week-long series, word spread that Preacher Graham, nominally a Presbyterian, had never been immersed. One look at the shocked and sour faces before him and Billy was inspired to announce that he would be baptized at the revival's end along with his own new converts. No less than 50 converts were baptized. Says Billy: "That was the first little inkling I had that maybe the Lord could use me in evangelism."

Answer to a Prayer. A few months later Billy was ordained a minister by the St. Johns Baptist Association of Northern Florida. He went on to preach "at every cowpath and wagon track in Florida." gained a strong voice, expanded confidence and got a scholarship to Wheaton College near Chicago. There he collected an A.B. in anthropology, an unusual major for a man who still rejects the theory of evolution.

The most important thing he did at Wheaton was to court his future wife, Ruth McCue Bell, a pretty, vivacious China missionary's daughter (Emily Cavanaugh had in the meantime married her Harvard man). Said he in a recent sermon: "I tell you ... the first time I kissed [my wife], I don't know whether she had any emotion, but I sure did. And when you fall in love with Jesus, you are going to feel it ... Now if I had married all the girls ... I wanted to marry, the Lord only knows where I would have been tonight. The Lord gave me the grace and the strength and the courage to wait . . . And after eleven years, we are still sweethearts. And it's been heaven."

As for Ruth Bell, Billy himself seemed to be the answer to a prayer—one she had written before she met him:

"Dear God," I prayed—all unafraid (As girls are wont to be) "I do not want a handsome man— But let him be like Thee; I do not need one big and strong, Nor one so very tall, Nor need he be some genius, Or wealthy, Lord, at all; . . . (But) let his face have character— A ruggedness of soul, And let his whole life show, dear God, A singleness of goal . . ."

Assist from a Gangster. Billy Graham surely showed a singleness of goal. In 1943, he toyed with the idea of joining up as a G.I., decided against it, instead volunteered for the chaplains' corps. Later he withdrew from the corps, saw no war service at all (as a minister he was draft exempt). After a year as pastor of a small basement church in Western Springs, Ill. (the active congregation more than doubled while Billy was there), he joined an organization called "Youth for Christ," founded in Chicago to combat delinquency among teenagers. As a Youth-for-Christer, Billy traveled all over the U.S. and the world, preaching in a different town every day. In 1946, the aging president of a small college (Northwestern Schools in Minneapolis) announced he thought it was God's will that Graham be his successor. Graham, who thought the job would sidetrack him, replied tartly: "If the Lord has called me to do this, why doesn't He tell us both, instead of just you?"

But he took the job, for two years. By 1947, he struck out as an independent evangelist with a week's campaign in Grand Rapids, Mich., but it was not until his Los Angeles crusade in the fall of 1949 that he really got going. Then a cowboy singer and a gangster helped make him famous.

After winning two minor celebrities as converts (Cowboy Singer Stuart Hamblen and Track Star Louis Zamperini), Graham made the front pages by converting one "Big Jim" Vaus, a wiretapper by trade who had recently done a job or two for Gangster Mickey Cohen. The story got even better when Graham invited Cohen to a small meeting of Hollywood personalities. "When I asked for people who wanted prayer to hold up their hands," he remembers, "Mickey lifted his hand, and I am sincerely convinced that he wanted God."

This was the kind of thing newsmen could not ignore. All at once Billy was a national figure.

The Technology of Salvation. While Evangelist Graham sincerely considers himself nothing but a tool of God, he believes in giving God plenty of help with some tools of his own. The tools he has fashioned add up to an intricate technology of soul-saving that might astonish St. Paul, bewilder John Wesley and give any Madison Avenue adman some ideas.

Like Field Marshal Montgomery, Billy Graham never launches an attack unless he can be fairly sure in advance that his forces are superior to the enemy—the main enemy perhaps being indifference. Before Graham agrees to conduct a campaign in any given city, preliminary negotiations may go on for years (New Orleans churchmen first began talking about the current crusade in 1950). Graham must be sure that he has the backing of the top Protestant churches in the area, as well as the support of business and civic leaders. After he accepts an invitation, the local sponsoring committee is promptly presented with a "Graham Plan" for financing.

Two months before the campaign is scheduled to begin, the first member of the Graham team arrives in town. Willis Haymaker, 57, who worked as advance man for such old-school soul-savers as Gypsy Smith and Bob Jones but thinks Billy is the greatest of them all, mobilizes the preachers and laymen of the cooperating churches into a vast cadre of workers. From 1,000 to 3,000 are tapped for choir duty. Between 700 and 1,000 become "counselors," and about 1,500 become ushers. Women are selected to staff the ticket office and switchboards. Deacons, Sunday school superintendents and other church workers are organized into "followup" classes, where they are taught how to bring new converts into local church life. Says Graham: "We have a fair audience ready before we even get there."

The town begins to sprout posters, street banners, window cards and bumper stickers announcing the impending crusade. Typical of the Graham team's meticulous know-how is the way its members tackled the matter of bumper stickers. First they tested the different methods of attaching a sign to a bumper—string, elastic, clips, hooks, adhesive. Having decided adhesive was most lasting, they began testing surfaces, determined on a kind called "Dayglo" which shines in sunlight or headlight. Dayglo comes in single, double and triple screen, hence more testing and the decision to use double. To find the best adhesive, lots of 25,000 were tested in various cities.

While such promotion is being readied, counselors are trained in regular classes and graded on-a-point system. About a dozen usually flunk and are tactfully asked to resign; marginal cases (especially those who dress sloppily) are held on "reserve," and the best students become "front-row" counselors (wearing red tabs in their badges).

Like a Cadillac. A couple of days before the opening meeting, Graham arrives with the rest of his team—a cluster of smoothly dressed young men with religious backgrounds and comely wives. In both matter and manner, Billy Graham has come a long way from the Los Angeles days when he billed himself as "America's Sensational Young Evangelist" in a "Mammoth Tent Crusade" with "Glorious Music, Dazzling Array of Gospel Talent, 22 Tremendous Nights." Today's ads consist mainly of the words "Hear Billy Graham," plus a picture. Says Jerry Beavan ("pronounced like heaven"), Graham's 31-year-old public-relations man: "When you see an advertisement for a Cadillac, it just says Cadillac and shows you a picture. Billy is like a Cadillac. We don't have to explain."

Graham's meetings, like his neckties, are less noisy than they used to be. Sounding brass and tinkling cymbal have been replaced by straight choir singing, with a simple organ and piano accompaniment. As the audience arrives (babies may be left in special nurseries known to the Graham staff as "bawl rooms"), Choir Leader Cliff Barrows is warming up the singers. Song

books are passed around to the crowd; then Barrows invites the audience to sing, swinging a glittering trombone; Bass-Baritone Bev Shea goes into action with a few oldtime-religion songs, and the collection and an invocation by a local cleric follow. Meanwhile Billy Graham sits on the rostrum, head in hand, meditating.

Before he begins his sermon, he asks the audience to join him in a short prayer. Then he plunges right into his text. During the sermon, he picks up the Bible again and again, swinging it, slamming it, almost literally hurling it at the Devil. Graham has abandoned his early hyperbole in favor of a strictly scriptural message, brought down to earth in everyday language. He has also weeded out the kind of literalness that once led him to deliver drawing-board specifications for heaven, which, he assured his audience (apparently relying on Revelations 21:16), "is 1,600 miles long, 1,600 miles wide and 1,600 miles high." Under the bright lights, he paces his rubber-matted platform, crouching, pointing, swooping upon his acres of audience from one angle, then another. His long-fingered hands are almost constantly in motion, thrusting, carving space, evocatively touching his breast, head, eyes, mouth or ears. His plangent voice hammers the audience with hardly a change of pace:

"Now the Devil came to Adam and Eve and said, 'Now, look here, you're not going to die. Why, if you eat of that tree, you'll become as other gods.' Now the Devil was lying, and Adam and Eve had to choose between the Devil's lie and God's word, the Devil's word and God's word. And they looked at the tree. And when the woman saw that it was good for food—that's the lust of the flesh, and it was pleasant to the eyes—that's the lust of the eye. and the tree should be desired to make one wise—that's the fruit of life, she took of the fruit.

"Now, look here. God said: 'Eve, if you eat it, you'll die.' She deliberately, with her eyes open, ate the fruit. When she did, she was separated from God, and when Adam ate the fruit, he, too, was separated from God . . . And man did die. And every man since then has died . . . When Adam, the federal head of the human race sinned, we sinned with him, and every person that has ever been born in the history of the world, except one, is born in sin . . .

"You have a moral disease, and that moral disease is sin. When you get a group of sinners together in what we call a society and a nation, it breaks out—this sin—in a war. And the root of all the world's ills is sin, and sin has separated us from God. And man must pay the penalty for breaking the law of God."

Preacher Graham spurns the conventional evangelist's final, heart-rending orgy of emotion. A true conversion, he thinks, must involve not only the emotions but the mind. When the first converts start to come forward, an extraordinary part of the Graham machinery swings into motion. It would surprise most converts to know that the pleasant person of their own sex and approximate age who falls into step beside them on the way to the "Inquiry Tent" is there as the result of careful planning and smooth quarterbacking.

Into the Tent. Counselors are seeded through the audience under the watchful eyes of "advisers" (mostly pastors) stationed at the aisles down which the converts must come. As soon as a convert starts forward, an adviser looks him over and signals to a counselor of the right sex and age to join the convert. If, as the crowd grows, the chief adviser is short of counselors, he raises his

right hand (for men) or his left hand (for women). Choir Leader Cliff Barrows catches the signal and passes it along to a reserve corps of counselors. (An unattended young man or woman calls for a raised right or left index finger; an older man or woman is indicated by the thumb and forefinger forming the letter O.)

Once inside the Inquiry Tent, the assembled converts hear a brief inspirational talk by Grady Wilson, Graham's boyhood friend and now billed as his "Associate Evangelist." Billy himself often drops in for a few words, and then each counselor really goes to work. There are "B Rations" (Bible leaflets) at every seat, and most of the counselors have learned by heart the rations' Bible verses. But his final job is to fill out a card about his "baby Christian," stating his name, address, occupation, age, church membership or preference. On each card there are also four categories of decision, one of which is to be checked: 1) Acceptance of Christ as Saviour and Lord; 2) Reaffirmation of Faith; 3) Assurance of Salvation; 4) Dedication of Life.

A convert's name on one of the cards sets off a chain reaction designed to lead the convert into permanent commitment in a local church (one reason why Graham, unlike many another evangelist, is popular with local churchmen). Next morning, a personal-looking letter from Billy Graham is mailed to the new convert. Later he is invited to another meeting and can order additional literature, known as an I.R. (for Instruction in Righteousness) Pack. Meanwhile, three duplicates of the "decision card" are typed up, one for the current working file, one for the future follow-up file, and one to be sent to the convert's local pastor with instructions to get to work (if the "baby Christian" has no pastor, one is chosen by a committee). If the pastor does not report back on the convert in a few weeks, he gets a jogging letter from headquarters and, eventually, a visitation.

The nerve center of this operation is a Minneapolis office building, where a staff of 100 handles the mail (12,000-15,000 pieces a week incoming, 8,000-10,000 a day outgoing) and keeps tabs on far-flung activities of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association. Here, amid whirring office machines, the spirit of I.B.M. meets the Spirit. Each morning, before she starts tabulating the incoming contributions, one girl clerk puts her fingers on the adding machine and says: "This is your money, God. Make it come out right."

How to Stay Humble. As high-keyed as a racehorse. Graham spends himself prodigally in God's service, but he takes good care of himself, too. eating four or five meals a day to keep up his strength, keeping a trailer at the stadium in New Orleans so he can change his sweat-drenched clothes each night immediately after speaking. He plays as much golf as he has time for (seldom more than nine holes, at an average 45). Almost obsessively clean (he takes three baths or showers on a busy day, has manicures to curb his nail-biting) and almost unnaturally natural, he moves through his world of hotel public rooms, charity drives, luncheons, interviews and popular adulation with anxious affability and a kind of 4-H Club charm.

Billy Graham is remarkably cheerful laboring in the Lord's vineyard, but he is not at peace. Like an exhausted man fighting to keep awake, he must constantly remind himself that in all the feverish adulation amid which he walks, pride is the Devil's best weapon against him. He fights and prays for humility. The team helps. "If the Lord will keep him anointed," says Grady Wilson. "I'll keep him humble." He needles Billy mercilessly, and practical jokes are standard operating

procedure. One team member, noting that the usually hatless Graham had bought himself a new hat in Dallas, filled it with shaving cream and rocked with laughter when Billy put it on. Billy gives as good as he gets. On the ship to London, he emptied Grady's seasickness capsules and filled them with mustard.

When Billy Graham goes home, it is to an eight-room rustic house in Montreat, N.C., where he and his wife Ruth live in unpretentious comfort (Billy tithes his \$15,000 a year from the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association). The Grahams do their best to keep their four children—Virginia, 9; Anne, 6; Ruth, 3; and William Franklin III, 2—from "hamming it up" for the tourists, who sometimes come in busloads to stare at the house. Virginia is currently trying to learn the Sermon on the Mount by heart, has been promised a bike and \$25 if she gets it down pat by Christmas. "I don't think she's going to make it," laughs her father.

Graham often conducts his morning "meditation" in bed, avoids the telephone, and dictates his newspaper columns, radio scripts and sermons half a dozen at a sitting. The spirit of the home is set by pert, pretty Ruth Bell Graham, who still knows the Bible better than her husband and whose quiet good taste has led a friend to call her "half the explanation for Billy Graham." "Not a day goes by," says Ruth, "when I don't ask the Lord for wisdom: how to bring up the children, how to make this suit, how to do this and that. It isn't really mystical . . . It's practical."

The Hungry Heart. Where does Billy Graham go from here? The stock criticism of evangelism is that its conversions are superficial and temporary, that it presents less than the whole Gospel. Graham confronts that with his unprecedented concern for seeing that each of his "baby Christians" turns into a spiritual grownup. The full measure of his success is still to be taken, but in Britain, for instance, pastors everywhere report church attendance and membership up since his dramatic campaign.

Billy's fondest hope is to spark a real religious revival in the U.S., and if any one person can do it, he is a likely candidate. He can prophesy: "The greatest sin of America is our disregard of God . . . God has allowed evil nations to be destroyed by other wicked nations . . . God may allow Russia to destroy America. Russia will get it in the end, but she may destroy America . . . It may take persecution and humiliation to bring America to God . . . There's nothing wrong with being rich, but we're using so much of it for ourselves . . . When I see a beautiful city such as New York, I also have a vision of crumbling buildings and dust. I keep having the feeling that God will allow something to fall on us in a way I don't anticipate unless we return to Him."

Billy can prophesy, but, perhaps more important, he can also speak to the longing, hungry heart: "Oh, on the outside you put on a big front. You laugh and you joke and all the rest, but when you're alone, there it is—that void, that aching, that empty place. There is a questing; there is a hunger; there is a longing for something else in life; and you haven't found it yet and you want it."

Before Billy Graham is through, a lot more people will begin looking for it—in the Inquiry Tent.

<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,823597,00.html>

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