

# Still Shining Bright

**Bill Bright turns 80 this month, but the founder of Campus Crusade for Christ stays busy in his twilight years building bridges with charismatics and calling for a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit.**

Bright by name, bright by nature. Bill Bright, the one-time confectionery salesman who went on to become whom many would nominate as one of the most influential Christian leaders of the 20th century, contemplates his approaching death with the anticipation of someone just given a bow-wrapped box of his once-famous fruit delicacies.

“Nothing could excite me more,” he says. “It’s a win-win situation. If I die, then I will see Him sooner than I’d planned. If I stay, then He must still have some things for me to do for Him here.”

Now, good Christians are, of course, expected to say that they are eagerly looking forward to going to heaven, and even more so leaders whose global influence is recognized not only by Christians but also by the secular world.

But there is not a hint of “have to” in Bill Bright’s words as he reflects on his struggle with pulmonary fibrosis—an ugly terminal condition his doctor bluntly told him was “the worst imaginable.”

“Worse than cancer, worse than heart trouble. He did it to wake me up because he thought I had my head in the sand...[that] I was just not being realistic,” Bright says with a slight smile. “I responded to him, ‘Praise the Lord.’

“It’s wonderful. Nothing could excite me more. But he doesn’t understand that. I’ve gone through some of the times of choking and passing out and fainting, and it’s not a very pleasant experience,” he says, gesturing to his breathing tube. “But I view it today as one of the great blessings of my life.”

## **Setbacks and Impact**

While Billy Graham may be more of a household name, Bill Bright is considered the evangelist’s equal by many for the far-reaching impact he has had through Campus Crusade for Christ. Both Assemblies of God General Superintendent Thomas Trask and Foursquare statesman Jack Hayford are among those who cite the Jesus Film Project—just one of 70 distinct Campus ministries—as likely the most effective single evangelistic enterprise of all time.

Bright’s entrepreneurial approach to ministry won him the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion in 1996. From that he received a \$1 million award, which he promptly gave to promoting one of his more recent initiatives—encouraging prayer and fasting. Calling the discipline the “atomic bomb” of the Christian life, he has completed personal, 40-day fasts each year since 1994 and annually brings together leaders from across the theological spectrum for a national prayer-and-fasting summit.

In 1945, as a successful young businessman with film-star looks, Bright became a Christian through the influential ministry of Henrietta Mears, a dynamic teacher at Hollywood First Presbyterian Church in Los Angeles. It was an all-or-nothing commitment of faith, exemplified by the contract he would draw up six years later with his wife, Vonette, in which

the young couple signed themselves over as slaves to Christ.

Within days Bright got the vision for what would become Campus Crusade for Christ—arguably the largest interdenominational Christian ministry in the world. In the last half-century he has circled the globe countless times, preached to crowds of more than a million, seen his writings published in millions of copies and scores of languages, and had his ministry applauded by Money magazine as one of the best-run Christian outfits around.

Yet now he is almost housebound, and the man whose staff communiqué is appropriately titled The Bright Side says these last few months have been “one of the highlights” of his life.

Although this summer he handed over the reins of Campus president to his longtime second-in-command, Steve Douglass—and rarely ventures from his Orlando, Florida, apartment, not even to make the short drive across town to Campus’ 500-acre international headquarters—Bright is still leading, albeit from a chair. He hosts video conferences with Campus leaders and has a “want-to-do” list that would tire someone half his age without his physical battle.

Last October Bright was diagnosed with pulmonary fibrosis, a scarring of the lung tissue that reduces the tissue’s ability to transport oxygen, making breathing progressively more difficult. There is no known cure, though Bright has sought treatment at the Mayo Clinic and tried alternative therapy.

Doctors think the condition may have developed from medication he had been receiving to treat prostate cancer discovered in 1995. A staff member at Campus’ headquarters says Bright has

been “an inspiration” in the way he has faced his—rather public—struggle with terminal illness. Douglass puts it more succinctly: “He is teaching people how to die.”

### **It's All About Jesus**

From a sofa with a view of a nearby lake, Bright pauses on a late May morning to sip the water he has to drink regularly to ease his coughing.

“If you have the right understanding of who God is, you understand that though He created the heavens and the earth—a hundred billion or more galaxies—He so loved the world that He personally came to planet Earth, died for our sins, was raised from the dead and now lives within us,” he says. “It’s unthinkable that He would allow anything to happen to me, or any true believer who seeks to honor Him, that’s not filtered through His love.”

It’s a typical expression of the down-to-earth faith Bright has championed for half a century through Campus, whose broad-ranging ministry has touched lives in literally every country in the world. It’s also characteristic of his second-nature habit of succinctly sharing the gospel whenever he gets the chance—in other words, whenever he is talking with someone—whether it’s a nurse at the doctor’s office, as earlier today, or a Christian journalist, as now.

This is, after all, the man who will say to someone who has misdialed the telephone and mistakenly reached the Bright home: “Wait a minute, it’s not the wrong number. God has a message for you.”

He recalls of his phone evangelism: "I've seen many people come to the Lord. It's amazing. You know, I have no other reason to live, if I couldn't talk about Jesus."

But in what he has been told may be his final more active months, Bright—due to turn 80 this month—has invested some of his declining energies in an unlikely effort. The man who has constantly sought to reduce some of the great mysteries of God to simple steps of practical faith—such as his multibillion-copy Four Spiritual Laws evangelistic booklet, whose "God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life" is quoted almost as much as Scripture by some—has collaborated on a work of fiction.

After writing 100 teaching books in various forms, Bright says: "I discovered fiction has more appeal than straight theological treatises." Even more surprising than this change of tack is the message. Instead of how-to plans of salvation and discipleship, the man whose ministry and own family was fractured by a split over charismatic issues is urging readers to embrace the reality of a miracle-working God.

With Bright providing the theological background and broad sweep of the message, novelist Ted Dekker and he have produced *Blessed Child*, a fast-moving thriller of international intrigue that centers on a 10-year-old boy with a remarkable healing gift. Raised in an African monastery, Caleb can make the lame walk and the blind see. Stadiums full of people fall out under the power of God as the child summons the Holy Spirit.

"We want readers to see the great God whom we worship can do anything," Bright says. "If we can awaken believers to do what they are supposed to do, they will seek and save the lost."

When a person falls in love with Jesus, they want to talk about Jesus. That's what happens when people are revived."

Jack Hayford, who has endorsed *Blessed Child* as containing "more biblical practicality [than] most theology textbooks," applauds Bright's "courage, in confronting the hyper-intellectualized brand of Christianity that afflicts and restricts so much of today's church—especially in America."

Although Bright has written widely on the practical disciplines of the Spirit-filled life through the years, this is a different, more mystical dimension.

"When you study the Old and New Testament you'll find it's filled with miracles," Bright says. "The God that does not change needs to be reintroduced to the church members—because the average church member has no concept of the God of the miraculous, the God of the supernatural."

*Blessed Child* includes an Hitchcock-style reference. As the celebrated movie director would make a passing appearance in his films, so Bright can be found in the new novel in the guise of Dr. Thompson, an aging evangelical leader with a terminal illness who chooses not to seek healing through Caleb.

But since completing the manuscript, and despite his having had one eye expectantly on heaven, Bright has been joining the thousands around the world who have been praying for his healing.

"I was praying, 'Lord, whatever You want, I'm happy for.' But I began to hear that still, small voice, 'I'm going to heal

you,'" he says.

"And I ignored it, because there's no one who's ever been healed of fibrosis, to my knowledge. There are only 30,000 people in America with [it], I'm told, and nobody has ever heard of anyone being healed."

Yet, as he prayed more, he says that he "felt impressed to pray that I would be healed," though he admits his ability to hear God's will is "not always perfect." Now he's been "believing God that I would be healed. I don't know why the Lord would because He doesn't need me here, but if He does, I trust He'll give me something worthwhile to do."

Among those who have personally prayed for Bright is healing evangelist Benny Hinn, whom Bright considers "a dear friend." Bright's casual mention of Hinn, who is often held up by anti-charismatic critics as Exhibit No. 1 of all that's wrong with the movement, is indicative of his widely recognized role as a tireless and effective bridge-builder across church streams.

"I have a great affection for Benny. He's reaching people that nobody else is reaching," he comments. "[He] is widely criticized in some circles, but thank God for the thousands that come to Christ through his ministry. Whether they come to see people healed, they get the gospel."

When Bright asked him once why people fell over when he touched them, Hinn said, "I don't really know." Adds Bright: "I don't have that gift, but I don't criticize it."

**Keeping a Ministry on Course**

There was a time, though, when controversy over charismatic gifts cut to the heart of Bright's ministry and home. As the Jesus movement touched colleges across the country during the 1970s, Campus introduced a policy that banned staff from speaking in tongues or advocating its practice. When Bright's son, Zac, experienced the baptism in the Holy Spirit, the clash of views caused him to leave the ministry and the family home.

They reconciled before long, and Campus rescinded its hard-line stand—although the organization's policy today still precludes tongues in public meetings. A quarter-century later, Bright says that the issue was never as much about the gifts of the Spirit as the focus of the ministry.

"At one of our major campuses in South Carolina where there was a great harvest, our director got involved in speaking in tongues, and he tried to promote it [so much] that the university officials kicked us off the campus. And we had no work there for 10 or 15 years," he recalls. "I've never spoken in tongues, but many of my beloved friends have, and I never criticize it. But it's obviously not God's will that a whole movement be destroyed because of tongues."

While there are charismatics currently serving with Campus, the organization is still careful not to get what it sees as sidetracked from its main goal. Bright tells of encouraging a speaker on prophecy to branch out with his own ministry because, he says, "I don't want Crusade to be called a prophetic movement."

"I praise God for him, but that's not what God called us to do, whether it be prophecy or tongues," Bright says. "We

didn't want anything to divert us from winning men to Christ, building them into faith, training them and sending them into the world. Win, build, train, send—that's our focus."

While admitting that he probably didn't handle the tongues controversy "as wisely as I should," Bright also says he welcomes the maturing he has seen in the charismatic movement through the intervening years.

"I'm very encouraged, because it has been a marvelous contribution to the body of Christ," he says. "In music, evangelism, prayer there have been many wonderful things that have come from the charismatic movement. They've infiltrated—and I'm using that in a good sense—the Catholic and mainline denominations [and] Orthodox. They have opened a lot of doors."

Bright acknowledges that some who read *Blessed Child* might wonder if he has "gone charismatic."

"I just say I have felt that God led me many years ago to build bridges. I'm a Presbyterian. I'm the 'frozen chosen,'" he says with a smile, "and yet I work with everybody who loves Jesus, whether they be charismatic or Catholic, Orthodox or mainliners."

"I'm a classical Christian. By that I mean I'm a New Testament Christian. I'm not an evangelical. I'm not a fundamentalist. I'm not Orthodox. I'm just a follower of Jesus in the traditional New Testament sense."

"Frankly, I don't even like the labels. When you say you're a Christian you alienate a lot of people needlessly because

there are a lot of bad things about Christianity—the inquisitions, the Crusades, and so on. So I’m just a believer.”

Although he has not spoken much about it publicly, Bright has often prayed for healing for others. “I’m not a Benny Hinn, but God has graciously answered my prayers,” he says.

One of the more dramatic instances occurred when he was speaking at a Hong Kong Bible college. The president told him that he had been praying for revival for years, and Bright was the man through whom it would come. But he was felled by a stomach bug the night before he was due to speak.

“My mind was in and out. I wasn’t even able to focus,” he recalls of the following morning. “I could hardly stand up.”

Bright gripped the pulpit to keep from falling, but says that “when I began to speak, the power of God came upon us, and I had the strength of a bull. God did meet us, and we did have revival.”

After the meeting he prayed for his interpreter, a well-known evangelist who had been incapacitated for several years with a mystery illness. “And he was healed, and within a short time he was out on the evangelistic trail again.”

It was his passion to see others out on that evangelistic trail that spurred Bright to challenge Christians to embrace the miraculous through Blessed Child.

“The churches are filled with people who are cold of heart—but

in most cases it's not because they want to be," he says. "Many hungry people are frustrated because they don't know what to do. To this day, nobody's ever witnessed to me in what you'd call a real witness, [though] I've had a couple people pass me tracts in the Atlanta airport.

"There are 100 million people in church every Sunday in the U.S., and we're not only not agents of change, we've been changed by the world's standards. We can be characterized like the church of Ephesus—we've left our first love. We are ritualistic, routine.

"Now, of course, there are thousands of good exceptions, but as a body we have no influence in education, media, government. Every major discipline of life one looks almost in vain to see the influence of believers. My goal in this book is to try to awaken the believer to see the great God whom we worship can do anything."

### **Called to Encourage**

At the same time as he's thinking big, Bright's also looking at the details. He applies the same kind of practical analysis to ministry that made Bright's California Confections a thriving business before he felt called by God to gather a different kind of fruit. He readily recounts some of the latest Campus ministry statistics, noting: "If you don't know what you've done, you don't know what yet needs to be done."

He has recently applied that same analysis to fasting and prayer and soon intends to publish proof of the growing movement's impact. "It's been demonstrated that fasting has played a major role in the acceleration of the church," he

says with simple reasoning. "Some people thought I was on some aesthetic, pious kick when I got involved."

But his annual 40-day fast has become "the highlight of the year—it's the time when we just develop a greater intimacy with God." Bright believes every believer should do the same.

"When Jesus gave the Great Commission, He said, 'Teach what I've taught you.' Well, obviously that had to include His 40-day fast. I don't know of anything that will accomplish more for evangelism than fasting and prayer."

Despite all the accolades he has received through the years and his acceptance by church leaders across the spectrum, Bright has not been without his critics. Some have charged that Campus' by-the-book approach to evangelism and discipleship is just too programmed and cookie-cutter. Others have blasted him for working with Catholics.

"I'm not a judge," he says. "I used to be. I was so critical as a new believer that everybody was wrong but 'me and thee'—and I was worried about 'thee.' God has helped me through the years to become more charitable and understanding. God has called me to be an encourager."

In some of his final days, that encouragement is for more believers to "know the reality of living a supernatural life through the enabling power of the Holy Spirit"—so that they may share God's love with others.

As he says in an afterword to *Blessed Child*: "There is indeed a supernatural reality all around us that is just as real as the world we see. When seen through spiritual eyes, a healed

heart and a transformed life are far more spectacular than a straightened hand or restored sight. These were the themes of the New Testament church, and they must be the themes that guide our lives today.”

## **The Miracle of the Jesus Film**

**The record-setting film project is just one of Campus Crusade for Christ's evangelistic efforts.**

While many may be surprised that Campus Crusade for Christ founder Bill Bright's latest book is a work of fiction about miracles, the supernatural occurrences are an almost everyday fact of life for the global ministry.

Bright himself says that there are documented accounts of people having been raised from the dead after screenings of the Jesus movie. People “see the Jesus film, and they say if Jesus can heal the blind, He can heal me. And so He does. Communities have been revolutionized by the message that resulted.”

As part of an interdenominational organization that seeks to avoid doctrinal controversies it fears may sap or sidetrack its evangelistic zeal, Campus staff may be asked not to promote or speak in tongues, but they are encouraged to pray for healing.

“We don't hold big healing services, but we do pray for people whenever they want prayer, and oftentimes people come forward,” says Paul Eshleman, director of the Jesus Film Project, Campus' flagship ministry.

Since the Gospel of Luke was dramatized on film in 1979, it has been viewed by almost 4.5 billion people around the world, from jungles to gymnasiums. Salvations recorded at live screenings total about 140 million. Campus estimates some 150,000 new churches have started as a result—although one missions organization puts the number closer to a million.

“In the West we look at the gospel in a linear way, and approach it on the basis that we are sinners and need a savior, Jesus, therefore we receive Him,” Eshleman says. “That is not how the rest of the world thinks. Most of the world is looking for somebody to follow who is bigger than themselves, and they receive Jesus for a number of reasons: He is bigger than nature; He can still a storm; He is more powerful than evil—they know about evil spirits. You can’t watch the film and not be struck by the fact that Jesus heals people over and over.”

Eshleman recalls an Indonesian woman blind for four years whose sight was restored during the crucifixion scene at a screening. Several people in her Muslim village came to Christ as a result.

In Uzbekistan, a film team prayed for the husband of a woman who offered them accommodation. She woke them in the middle of the night to tell them his leprosy had vanished. Seventeen relatives turned to Jesus.

Campus currently has 2,600 teams screening the movie around the world, in 654 translations. Almost 300 other versions are in progress, and in some parts of the United States, churches have joined forces to mail a video copy to every home in their area. More than 1,000 denominations and groups use the Jesus

movie in their own programs.

Although it is now the most visible of Campus' 70 separate major ministries, it was initially among the most controversial.

"It marked a big change for us," Eshleman says. "We were primarily a personal evangelism movement, and anything that had to do with mass evangelism was something that Billy Graham did—and TV ministries. Our primary focus was one-on-one. It was like, 'That's not for us.'"

In addition to its well-known and widespread student ministries—currently at more than 1,000 schools in the United States alone—Campus initiatives also include Christian Embassies, an outreach to United Nations delegates and workers in New York and government and diplomatic staff in Washington, D.C.; Josh McDowell's evangelistic ministry; Athletes in Action; and illusionist Andre Kole's ministry. There are 25,000 full-time staff and half a million volunteers. Between them they presented the gospel to 1.3 billion people last year.

In many parts of the world, Campus workers labor closely with charismatic and Pentecostal believers.

"There is great fellowship and great admiration for the evangelistic fervor of the charismatic movement," Eshleman says. "Of the people involved in evangelism worldwide, the most aggressive come out of Pentecostal backgrounds, and we often find ourselves in partnership with them."

As Steve Douglass assumes the presidency of the Campus juggernaut at the end of a yearlong transition—planned before Bright’s terminal illness became known—he knows he cannot step into his predecessor’s shoes.

“The one transition we are not making is God. He is on both sides of this. I have one main responsibility and a lot of secondary ones,” he says. “My main responsibility is to walk closely with God. My secondary ones are to lead the ministry, to give direction.

## **Bill Bright on Healing**

**His novel was co-authored by a writer who saw miracles.**

Ted Dekker turned to childhood memories for inspiration in writing *Blessed Child*, through which, with Campus Crusade for Christ International founder Bill Bright, he portrays the dramatic impact supernatural acts of God have on individual lives and a world that sees them broadcast live on television.

Born to Canadian missionary parents, he grew up in the jungles of Irian Jaya in the midst

of a move of the Holy Spirit that saw hundreds of the Dani people, a Stone Age tribal group, come to Christ—a story told in his parents’ own *Torches of Joy* and missionary researcher Don Richardson’s *Lords of the Earth*.

“We were just Christians serving the Lord and fulfilling the Great Commission,” he says. “It was the basis of my experience of Christianity—to give up everything and follow Christ, to follow the first two greatest commandments and then seek and

save the lost, and everything else will kind of pan out.”

Coming from a Dutch Reformed background, Dekker’s parents were “neither charismatic, nor anti. They just believed God,” he says. After years on the mission field, Dekker’s mother had “a dramatic experience with the Holy Spirit” in which she found herself speaking in another language. Then, as local tribespeople began to become Christians, Dekker’s father baptized a new convert who had been blind since birth.

“He came up out of the water seeing,” Dekker says.

Far from the jungles of Irian Jaya, Blessed Child sees thousands cramming American stadiums and falling under the power of God as a young boy prays.

“I have never seen a thousand people healed at once, but if God can heal one blind person, He can heal 20 or a thousand. There really is no difference,” says Dekker, now 38. “Every miracle that happens in the book is rooted in Scripture, even the falling down,” he says, referencing the Roman soldiers’ dropping to the ground when they went to arrest Jesus at Gethsemane.

Graduating from Evangel College with a degree in philosophy and religion, Dekker spent several years in business before he was able to save enough money to bankroll his first love—writing. He completed four manuscripts before Word (now W) Publishing gave him a contract. His first novel, Heaven’s Wager, was published to acclaim last year.

Dekker, who is part of a Foursquare church near his home in Montrose, Colorado, has high praise for his collaborator.

“Growing up on the mission field, I have met many Christian leaders in my time, but I don’t believe I have ever met someone as genuine as [Bill Bright],” he says. “He really believes that God is the same today as He was yesterday.”

And that is the heart of Blessed Child, Dekker says—for which he and Bright have discussed both a movie version and a sequel.

“We want people to engage the reality of the supernatural. Not only has He not changed, but He is interested in revealing Himself. It’s not like way back in Bible times He used to do those things, but now He has kind of given up on humanity, and we are left with the baggage of religion. I don’t believe that. He is as interested today as He was then.”

---

Andy Butcher is Charisma’s senior writer and the editor of Charisma News Service, published by e-mail each weekday.

---