

Billy Graham: A Faithful Witness

Editor's Note: This article originally appeared in 2005 as Charisma magazine's cover story. At that time, Billy Graham was about to make his last stadium appearance. On his 95th birthday, Charisma looks back to honor America's favorite evangelist.

The all-night prayer meeting was heating up. People poured out their hearts before God. "It seemed we had a hotline to heaven," remembers one participant. "Wave after wave of prayer flooded our hearts."

It was 3 a.m., July 13, 1949, and prayer had been going on for the last five hours in the Rainbow Room of the Westminster Hotel in Winona Lake, Indiana. Between 40 and 50 Youth for Christ leaders were present, including a young Billy Graham.

Armin Gesswein, the prayer leader, addressed the group: "You know, our brother Billy Graham is coming out to Los Angeles for a crusade this fall. Why don't we gather around this man and lay our hands on him and pray for him? Let's ask God for a fresh touch to anoint him for this work."

Cliff Barrows, a longtime friend and co-worker of Graham's, remembers that night as if it were yesterday. "We were on our faces before the Lord. Some of us were under the piano praying," Barrows told Charisma. "The Spirit of God moved in our hearts, breaking us and revealing our pride."

Afterward, Graham opened his Bible to Joel 3:13 and with deep conviction read aloud the words, "Put in [your] sickle, for the harvest is ripe" (NKJV).

A few months later, Graham's first Los Angeles Crusade became front-page news. William Randolph Hearst sent a telegram to

his editors: "Puff Graham." His order to give plenty of space to reporting on Graham may have launched the evangelist into the national public eye, but those who were in the Rainbow Room that night would tell you that prayer was and still is the real power behind Graham's success.

For half a century since that night of prayer, Graham has preached the gospel to more than 210 million people. His 416 crusades have taken him all across the United States and to 185 countries and have earned him the title of the world's most famous preacher.

He's been on the Gallup organization's list of Ten Most Admired Men in the World 45 times, more than any other person. He is a friend of monarchs, popes, prime ministers and other world leaders. Yet first and foremost, Graham is "America's Preacher," a confidant of presidents and commoners alike, a man who reaches across denominational lines and racial barriers with the good news of God's love, and who brings consolation and hope in times of national tragedy.

For the tall, gangly farm boy from Charlotte, North Carolina, who was once told he'd "never amount to more than a poor, country Baptist preacher somewhere out in the sticks," this notoriety can only be attributed to God's blessing.

"There are better preachers and better teachers, yet the Lord has chosen to use an ordinary man in an extraordinary way," says Stephan Tchividjian, Graham's eldest grandson.

From his earliest days in Bible college, Graham struggled with his inadequacies. He believed he would never be a preacher because he was too poorly educated. And yet he has admitted that the Holy Spirit showed him he would touch many. "I used to have the strangest glimpses of the crowds that I now preach to," he says.

At the age of 19, after a long battle in prayer, Graham says he got down on his knees and told God, "If you want me to

preach, I will do it." Since that evening, Graham has had one focus and one passion in his life: to save souls. "It has been the motive and focus of his entire life," says his eldest son, Franklin Graham.

"His focus wasn't to become famous. It wasn't to make money. It was to take the gospel to the ends of the earth, and God has honored it," Franklin adds.

During the course of Graham's life he has had many opportunities to be sidetracked. Barrows, who has served as music and program director with the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association (BGEA) since it was founded, says Graham "has had opportunities to build an institution, establish a university, or become the president of this or that organization and he's turned them all down. He always said: 'I've been called to be an evangelist; I wouldn't stoop to be a king.'"

All who know Graham say he is one of the most humble men they have ever known. "His total lack of self-promotion, competitiveness and jealousy has freed him up to keep his eyes on God, promote others, and let God promote him," says daughter Anne Graham Lotz.

"Billy always encouraged us not to think of ourselves more highly than we ought," Barrows says. "He warned us not to reach up and touch the glory of God."

Millions of people know Billy Graham for his simple, straightforward biblical preaching, punctuated over and over with the phrases "the Bible says" and "God loves you." An insatiable reader of history and politics, he likes to interject current events into his sermons, making them culturally relevant to his audience. But his basic message of salvation through Christ has never changed.

Just before his November 2004 Los Angeles Crusade at the Rose Bowl in Pasadena, Graham told reporters, "I intend to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ as simple as I know how and trust

the Holy Spirit to apply it to every individual life." That strategy has worked for him since that first crusade in Los Angeles 56 years ago.

Graham has always attributed the success of his evangelistic crusades to prayer. "He always said that the three most important things in any crusade are prayer, prayer and more prayer," Barrows says.

If the Graham team had anything close to a personal intercessor it was Pearl Goode of Pasadena. For many years she prayed in secret for Graham until he heard about her and made provision for her to attend his crusades so she could pray on-site. Goode lived to be 90, and at her funeral, Graham's wife, Ruth, paid her this tribute: "Here lie the mortal remains of much of the secret of Bill's ministry."

Graham has always viewed himself not so much as a preacher or an evangelist, but primarily as a "doorkeeper in the house of God," helping people to enter. And he admits feeling a spiritual anointing for that task. In one of his many biographies, the 2003 book *The Billy Graham Story*, he says: "When I come to my invitation I sense God come on me, and I feel a power at that invitation that's peculiar."

During the 1957 New York Crusade, Robert Walker of *Christian Life* magazine captured Graham's passion about the giving of an invitation to the audience.

"This is the most dramatic moment of the evening," Walker wrote in one of the first articles about Graham. "Here is the point on which the prayers of the world have been concentrated. All the preparations will have been in vain if the Spirit of God does not convict men and women of their need of the Savior."

Barrows says that the response to his invitations, which is consistently overwhelming, has been one of the most amazing facets of Graham's ministry.

"Oftentimes Billy has been so weary physically and has felt like he has been in the boxing ring with the devil himself, but he always felt that when the invitation was given there would be a response, if he was faithful. And this has been so true."

A Man of Peace

Long ago Graham decided to focus on his mission and let God deal with his enemies. Although he is recognized for helping to bridge the gap between fundamentalists and mainstream denominations, there were many times he was criticized for his actions by both sides.

"There were a few times when I would hear of some of the lies, distortions of the truth, and slander, that I had a bit of resentment in my heart and was tempted to lash back," Graham wrote in his diary. "But then scores of Scriptures began to echo in my ears and penetrate my heart and gradually the Spirit of God shed abroad in my heart an overwhelming love for these brethren."

"It's been in Dad's heart his whole life to see unity in the body of Christ," says his son Ned, "but that has not happened, and it has grieved him and caused him massive internal pain. But he would never criticize or condemn anyone."

"My father is so accepting, so nonjudgmental," says eldest daughter, Gigi Graham Tchividjian. During the height of the Clinton scandal, she was her father's date at the 75th anniversary celebration for Time magazine. The Clintons were also in attendance.

"Daddy sat with the Clintons and was so warm and gracious," Tchividjian told Charisma. "In the limousine going back to the hotel, Daddy and I were talking about how difficult it must be for the Clintons with so many people gossiping and judging them. His comment was: 'It's the Holy Spirit's job to convict; it's God's job to judge; and it's our job to love.'"

Graham's genuine graciousness and acceptance of others, along with his ability to steer clear of controversial issues, has provided him a broad ministry platform. On the political front he has been a friend, confidant, and adviser to 10 American presidents, including George W. Bush. And Bush has made no secret of the fact that a conversation he had with Graham triggered his own conversion.

In the summer of 1985, Graham was invited to Kennebunkport, Maine, where several Bush family members were vacationing. In his biography, *A Charge to Keep*, Bush recounts the effect Graham had on his life.

"That weekend Rev. Graham planted a mustard seed in my soul, a seed that grew over the next year. ...It was the beginning of a new walk where I would recommit my heart to Jesus Christ."

Graham has been a great encourager to many around the world, but none appreciate him more than those with whom he works at the BGEA. "Billy has always been a great encourager who inspired confidence in those who worked for him," Barrows told *Charisma*. "We were a team, we had a partnership, and the guys, including myself, would have died for him because of his love, appreciation and trust in us."

His co-workers also know Graham as one who enjoys a good laugh. Barrows recalls a time when Graham filled a colleague's hat with shaving cream. That man, Grady Wilson, an associate evangelist with the BGEA and a boyhood friend of Graham's, put the hat on and found himself covered with the foamy soap. "Billy was always full of great joy and enthusiasm," Barrows says. "And authentic. He was himself in the pulpit and out of the pulpit."

A Fragile Messenger

Today, at 86, Graham is in declining health. In addition to having Parkinson's disease, he broke his hip last year and was forced to postpone two crusades planned for summer 2004. The

Heart of America Crusade, held in October in Kansas City, Missouri, marked the first time he had preached in more than a year.

Leaning on a walker, he told his audience: "I feel like I did when I was a teenager starting to preach. I feel like I'm starting over again."

Graham said the recent New York Crusade, held on June 20th at Madison Square Gardens, was his last. But family and friends are not so sure.

"It's his eighth last crusade!" Barrows told Charisma. "Billy doesn't find the word "retirement" in the Bible, and he's going to preach as long as the Lord gives him strength."

"At this point I think a lot depends on his health," Gigi Tchividjian says. "I was with him in Kansas City, and just before he got up on the platform he was very weak and could hardly speak. Then he stood up in that pulpit, and he was like a different man. The Holy Spirit adrenaline began to kick in!"

"Right now his health is very good," says Franklin, current head of the BGEA. "He's the best he's been in three years. When he gets strong he starts having all kinds of ideas and that means more work for me!"

The BGEA moved from Minneapolis to Charlotte, North Carolina, in 2004 – closer to Franklin's Samaritan's Purse offices in Boone, as well as to the Billy Graham Training Center in Asheville.

What are Graham's plans for the future? "Billy recognizes we have a great responsibility to pass the baton to the younger generation," Barrows says. "I think a great legacy that he has now, and will increasingly have, is encouraging and helping to inspire young evangelists. I know young preachers who would love to sit at Billy Graham's feet."

Barrows says he'd like to see the elderly Graham do broadcasts from the training center or from his home. "He could sit by the fireplace in the winter time, or on the porch in the summer time, and talk to evangelists gathered in different parts of the world about the calling and ministry of evangelism," Barrows adds.

Graham's preaching has been the catalyst for millions of transformed lives. Many now wonder who will fill his shoes.

"There are many evangelists who are faithfully preaching the Word today," Barrows says. "But I believe that God had this particular era of evangelism, and I think it's been unique. It's been God's sovereignty that has allowed Billy to preach in the largest stadiums in the world filled with people who are hungry to hear."

When asked about the legacy he hopes to leave, Billy Graham told Charisma: "I want to be remembered as a person who was faithful to God, faithful to my family, faithful to the Scriptures and faithful to my calling. I want the world to remember Billy Graham as a man that dedicated his life to the Lord and never looked back."

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