

**BILLY GRAHAM, ELMER GANTRY, AND THE PERFORMANCE OF A NEW  
AMERICAN REVIVALISM**

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## ABSTRACT

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Throughout Billy Graham's career, the evangelist sought performative manners to ensure that he would not be perceived as another "Elmer Gantry", or huckster preacher out to win money, fame, and favor. Graham's intent was to grow a ministry that would form a new performance paradigm for American revivalism. Graham prepared as an actor to use his gifts, train his voice and body, to write a different style of script, to capitalize on celebrity, and to embrace new media forms that would bring his message around the world thus creating a "New" revivalism while at the same time distancing himself from being seen as the character in Sinclair Lewis' novel *Elmer Gantry* and subsequent Richard Brooks directed movie version of *Elmer Gantry* starring Burt Lancaster as a Graham-like Gantry.

This project reintroduces a familiar figure to recent history and elucidates the social and performative transitions constitutive of Billy Graham's journey to cast himself as a desirable evangelist. Graham's public performance is viewed, specifically from before the Los Angeles crusade of 1949 to Graham's reaction following the Academy Awards when the movie version of *Elmer Gantry* won three statues (1961). The example of Graham in performance as preacher, as well as the type of evangelical faith he proffered and represented, sheds critical light on the way in which Graham created a new revivalism based on a new performance paradigm.

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## **Dedication**

This Dissertation is dedicated to Faith, Family, and Friends.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Faith: it was sometimes difficult to critically focus on a stalwart of the faith while at the same time be respectful of the faith. Jesus led the way. Family: Jeannie, my wife, was always as supportive as a wife could be, juggling children, home, and her own interests while making sure room was given for writing. Thank you Jeannie. My parents were equally supportive, providing encouragement and resources for study. Thanks mom and dad. Friends: I could not have found a better committee, thank you Ron, Jonathan, Jim, and Bruce. All four of you were encouraging yet challenging while always staying respectful of what it means to be a fulltime student, spouse, father, and employee. My colleagues at IWU for allowing the excuse, "I can't, I'm writing," and for the support of the administration. Thank you Denise, Scott, Randall, Greg, Bud, Connie, Jerry, Pam, Brian, Mary, Joy, Mike, and Brenda. Finally, thank you to the Billy Graham Archives staff at Wheaton College and to Roger Bruns who personally answered my emails. "And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him" Colossians 3:17.

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## Introduction

In 1948, a miracle happened. Billy Graham, a head-strong young revivalist from North Carolina was trying to make a name for himself, but charges were surfacing that he was another “Elmer Gantry” bent on bilking the masses and luring young women to their demise. Roger Bruns, in *Billy Graham: a Biography*, declares that after reading *Elmer Gantry*, Graham sought real change in his life. Graham did not want to be known as an “Elmer Gantry,” a huckster, charlatan itinerant preacher, who, like the title character in the novel, sought quick thrills, easy money, and no attachments.<sup>1</sup> From the moment Graham recognized his own visage in the satirical portrait, there were no excuses he could rationalize to prevent him from distancing himself and his ministry from the subtlest perception of impropriety. Soon after, Billy Graham sought to perform the Anti-Elmer Gantry, a decision that would shape his life’s work and ultimately form a new performance paradigm of American revivalism. In this dissertation, I will argue how his preemptive management of the “Gantry” crisis led Graham to become an exemplar for many American ministries. Graham’s ability to prophetically predict his labeling and find ways to tangibly separate both in word and deed from this tag, is a large reason why his Association has been so internationally successful.

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<sup>1</sup> Roger Bruns, *Billy Graham: A Biography* (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 2004) 12. (Mr. Bruns confirmed his research in a personal email.)

## Graham's Crisis

At the end of a crusade in Atlanta in 1950, *The Atlanta Constitution* ran two pictures side by side. One was of Graham in the pulpit exhorting the throng; the other was of his chief usher carrying a bag containing the "love offering" of around \$16,000.<sup>2</sup> The implication was unmistakable – Graham knew what role his audiences would cast him in. In his autobiography, *just as I am*, Graham writes,

The day after the closing meeting on December 10, the *Atlanta Constitution*, accompanying its wrap-up story of the Crusade, printed two pictures side by side. In the first, I was grinning broadly and waving good-bye as I stepped into a car for my departure to South Carolina. In the next, two Crusade ushers, with a uniformed police sergeant between them, could barely wrap their arms around four bulging money sacks. "GRAHAM 'LOVE OFFERING' COLLECTED AT FINAL SERVICE," read the caption. I was horrified by the implication. Was I an Elmer Gantry who had successfully fleeced another flock? Many might just decide I was.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to this concession, Graham also admitted of this episode in 1966, "It was like a kick to the stomach to me. We didn't know of any way to support our ministry except in the way it had always been done -- by taking a 'love offering.' I

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<sup>2</sup> Incidentally, that night's "love offering" was supposed to be used for starting the "Hour of Decision" radio program.

<sup>3</sup> Billy Graham, *Just As I Am: The Autobiography of Billy Graham* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997) 185.

asked Dr. Jesse Bader, the director of evangelism for the National Council of Churches, what I ought to do. There was just one thing I could do, he said. ‘Go on a salary and publish it.’”<sup>4</sup>

Granted, Graham knew he was not the first to be labeled an “Elmer Gantry,” but he certainly did not want to propagate the character.

- 1832: Ephraim K. Avery, a Methodist famous itinerant revivalist was accused of murdering a pregnant mill girl in Rhode Island. He was ultimately acquitted but was chased out of town.
- 1874: a friend to Henry Ward Beecher, a very popular minister in Brooklyn and brother of Harriet Beecher Stowe (author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*), accused Beecher of having an affair with his wife. What followed was a sensational six-month trial that ended with a hung jury.
- 1926: Aimee Semple McPherson led the largest church in America when she disappeared for a month. She turned up in Mexico and said she had been kidnapped and had to trek across the dessert. When a reporter noticed that her shoes were not scuffed, there was a trial accusing her of immoral behavior with a married man. She was charged with conspiracy to impair public morals. The case was dropped but her ministry suffered because of the scandal.<sup>5</sup>
- Currently the Congress has subpoenaed various church leaders’ economic records, including Creflo Dollar, Benny Hinn, Kenneth Copeland, Eddie Long,

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<sup>4</sup> Harold H. Martin, “Revivalist Billy Graham,” *The Saturday Evening Post*, 13 April 1966: 22.

<sup>5</sup> Larry Mart, and Ginny Carroll, *Ministry of Greed: The Inside Story of the Televangelists and Their Holy Wars* (New York: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1988) 32-33.

Joyce Meyer, and Paula White which could lead to an uncovering of additional abuses.

All of these scandals helped (and continue to) bolster the stereotype of evangelistic cynicism, hypocrisy, lechery, and greed written about by Sinclair Lewis in the character of Elmer Gentry.

Graham prepared as an actor to use his gifts, train his voice and body, to write a different script, to capitalize on celebrity, and to embrace new media forms that could bring his message around the world. Graham's intent was to create a "New" revivalism so as to distance himself from being seen as the huckster character in Lewis' novel *Elmer Gantry* and subsequently confirmed by the very different Richard Brooks' movie version of *Elmer Gantry* starring Burt Lancaster as a Graham-like Gantry.

### **The Crisis Motif Serves as Graham's Impetus**

Stressing the extent to which the church has not addressed the needs of society and often needs a "crisis" in its history for changes to be made, Samuel Hill wrote of the "crisis motif."<sup>6</sup> This idea of change in the face of crisis fits well when trying to understand Graham's actions as it relates to the overall history of evangelicalism, especially in America during Graham's pivotal years of 1948-1961. The "crisis motif" drew inspiration from theologians Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Reinhold Niebuhr out of a

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<sup>6</sup> See Samuel Hill, *Southern Churches Crisis* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1967) esp. 193-211. The theme also has a longer tradition stretching back to C. Vann Woodward and W. J. Cash, historians who used their scholarship to speak at perceived truth.

call for responsibility and relevance among the theological minded.<sup>7</sup> The purpose here is not to challenge the substance of these scholars' work, and this is by no means the first time the limits of the crisis motif have been specified; still, the legacy of the crisis motif does threaten to distract scholars from the larger influences of evangelicalism on social change in modern America, be it either as an insider or outsider point of view.

As historian Jane Dailey has suggested, Christianity that does not satisfy the moral standards of its scholars is, nevertheless, still Christianity.<sup>8</sup> That is, a charlatan preacher can still be a Christian, albeit probably not a good one. But, as originally put forth by Samuel Hill, the crisis motif rests on one inaccurate prediction: that the silence of the church on social issues would eventually lead to its irrelevance in a changing nation. Of course, evangelicalism has continued to prosper, in part because its significance for many Americans remains much more personal than political, but also because many evangelicals eventually found a middle ground of being able to, in the parlance of modern evangelicals, "hate the sin, but not the sinner," or, in broader terms, able to differentiate between the work God can do, even in a problematic preacher (just because people who came to call themselves Christians through conduits such as Jimmy Swaggart, Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker, etc., all of whom made clichéd blunders, need not mean that these believers are no longer on good moral ground).

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<sup>7</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge (New York: Touchstone, 1971) and Richard Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography* (New York: Pantheon, 1985).

<sup>8</sup> Jane Dailey, "Sex, Segregation, and the Sacred after *Brown*," *Journal of American History* 91.1 (June 2004): 120-122.

Graham helped to create and broadcast this middle ground while finding a deeper social Gospel, which became the public face of much of modern American Evangelicalism. He did it with a prophetic reaction that preempted the inevitable crisis, even endeavoring to mentor other ministries to do the same. Eric J. Paddon's dissertation, "Modern Mordecai: Billy Graham in the Political Arena," examines Graham's ability to be both prophet and pastor to the political elite. Graham's prophetic nature has also been documented in Nancy Gibbs very recent *The Preacher and the Presidents: Billy Graham in the White House* (2007) where Gibbs concedes that Graham touched certain power players early in their career who eventually became presidents (Nixon, Carter, Reagan, Clinton, George H.W. Bush, and George W. Bush). However, Graham was not just an advisor or prophet to Presidents. What this dissertation proposes is that while Graham is often considered the nation's pastor, he also had the ability to predict his own future and change his performance techniques so that his ministry preempted any crisis that might have formed otherwise.

While people speculate endlessly about him (I am no different) and try to find his "crisis," Graham has steered his life with such caution as to not be cast as a pretender preacher. Indeed, it is difficult to know whether the private man at all resembles the public one. Unlike other celebrities who sometimes let their care down (explode with an expletive, throw a cell phone, or some other reaction that gives observers a glimpse of their "real self"), Billy Graham views his public persona with such high regard that when a 30-year-old gaffe surfaced (anti-Semitic remarks with President Nixon), Graham's apology was almost universally accepted. Also, when

Graham's finances were scrutinized with such vigor that many public figures distanced themselves from Graham even before a clean report emerged, Graham earned more respect for his openness than others in similar positions might have.

## **Thesis**

This project seeks to reintroduce a familiar figure to the narrative of recent history and, in the process, elucidate the social and performative transitions constitutive of Billy Graham's journey to cast himself as the desirable evangelist. In doing this, I will first focus on Graham's public performance regarding the four points suggested in the Graham ministry's Modesto Manifesto (discussed in detail later) and specifically from the birth of Graham's international ministry immediately before and after the Los Angeles crusade of 1949 through to Graham's reaction following the Academy Awards when the movie version of the novel *Elmer Gantry* won three statues (1961). During these years, the North Carolina native maintained a visible and controversial presence in America while endeavoring to perform himself away from public pronouncements that he was only out to win favor, money, and power. The example of Graham in performance as preacher, as well as the type of evangelical faith he proffered and represented, can shed critical light on the way in which Graham sought to create a different role in a new American revivalism. Graham, in order to avoid the charge of being another "Elmer Gantry," desired not to choose these strictures, opting instead to create a new revivalism based on a new performance paradigm.

This dissertation admittedly contains many of the old stories, some of them perhaps now considered apocryphal, which have been passed on for years by tellers of



the Billy Graham story, including Graham himself. But woven through this Billy Graham story is the understanding that Graham is preacher and performer, actor and evangelical noble who, as Marshall Frady writes, “has transmuted into a peculiar sort of megacelebrity, a megastar of his age.”<sup>9</sup> This dissertation explores this iconoclastic recognition of Graham as a megacelebrity with so much breadth of power, he is often seen as the face of American Protestantism as well as the anti-Elmer Gantry.

### Sources

Growing out of these concerns are questions of how Graham performed against the stereotypical dramatic preacher out to swindle the masses. To measure Graham’s reactions and his changes, both in his physicality, the preached word, and his corporate solidification, this dissertation uses four methods for inquiry. First, videotape and radio addresses of Graham in his crusades are used to determine changes in physicality; second, recordings (both audio as well as speeches and sermons that were written down and are collected in the Billy Graham Center Archives on the Wheaton Campus) illuminate Graham’s theological shifts as well as his changes in vocality; third, Graham’s personal writings detailing his changing theology are used to understand Graham’s shifting role; and fourth, numerous biographies and periodical/serial writings, some critical, others personal, are used to determine how others perceived his rise to fame and evangelistic fortune, both in their interpretations of his performance as a preacher inside and outside the pulpit.

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<sup>9</sup> Marshall Frady, *Billy Graham: A Parable of American Righteousness* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006) 16.

This dissertation seeks to clarify how Graham made decisions to turn from the ways of many of his contemporaries because of his apparent reading and viewing of the book and movie versions of *Elmer Gantry*. Using these methods, obvious signs in Graham's public and private performances, his writings, and the writings of others, including those within his inner circle, indicate Graham's ability to perform dissimilarly to his perception of the character of "Elmer Gantry" was purposeful.

### **Definition of Key Terms**

Any attempt, however, to interpret how Graham affected both the religious and performance space also requires a step back to consider the influence of American evangelicalism on public life, how Graham revised revivalism to meet his needs, and Graham's endeavor to make sure that his ministry moved contrary to many common negative performative perceptions. Evangelicalism has itself become a contested term, and not easily defined, leading D. G. Hart, a prominent historian of American Christianity, to wish it good riddance as a unit of analysis.<sup>10</sup> Modern evangelicalism is in part, an elastic construction generated and perpetuated by its proponents, detractors, and scholarly interrogators alike. Yet it was also a self-avowed, internalized label for Graham. As has "liberal" and "conservative," "evangelical" has become such a pervasive modifier that, while often frustratingly vague, has inextricably joined the pantheon of American political identities (both negatively and positively). During the

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<sup>10</sup> D. G. Hart, *Deconstructing Evangelicalism: Conservative Protestantism in the Age of Billy Graham*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004). Hart primarily wrote to an audience of born-again Christians, and the title of his book suggests that Graham qualifies as evangelical. At the same time, Hart dedicated substantial space to debunking various scholarly uses of evangelicalism.

years considered here, approximately 1948-1961, evangelicalism stood apart from Protestant liberalism and most other forms of mainline denominationalism, as well as from Roman Catholicism and Orthodoxy. Moreover, evangelicalism currently remains a useful category for interpreting the type of cross-denominational faith Graham and many others uphold – a term that is less specific than labels “Protestant” or “conservative,” yet obviously too broad for “Baptist” or “Pentecostal.”<sup>11</sup> With this said, while this study does not disregard important distinctions among the Reformed, Wesleyan, and free-church traditions, the very nature of Graham’s ministry has lent itself to a certain conflation of such categories into charges that Graham himself is an ecumenist.<sup>12</sup> Evangelicalism (along with one of its modes of expression, revivalism) has worked both influentially on a large and small scale, as a sweeping performative social force, and as a discrete movement within individual souls. Similarly, revivalism “is a spiritual movement within Christianity that calls individuals to make a self-conscious decision to repent of sin and believe the gospel, and thereby seeks to bring them an assurance of being in the right or proper relationship with God, and integrate them into a community with other like-minded individuals.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> For a historical overview of American evangelicalism, see Hart, *That Old-Time Religion in Modern America: Evangelical Protestantism in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2002).

<sup>12</sup> American Protestantism has generally fostered a firmer resistance to ecumenicalism, weaker identifiable church or denominations, in favor of ecclesiastical separatism. Charges were laid against Graham as early as 1954 when speaking at Union Theological Seminary Graham used the word “ecumenical” approvingly. See Mark A. Noll, David W. Bebbington, and George A. Rawlyk’s *Evangelicalism: Comparative Studies of Popular Protestantism in North America, The British Isles, and Beyond, 1700-1990* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) 370-381.

<sup>13</sup> See Michael J. McClymond, “Issues and Explanations in the Study of North American Revivalism,” *Embodying the Spirit: New Perspectives on North American Revivalism*, Ed. Michael J.

This study employs an expansive understanding of evangelicalism as operating simultaneously on theological, attitudinal, and performance levels in America. Certain things can be said about evangelicalism: generally the constituency holds to biblical and doctrinal orthodoxy, emphasizing the born-again moment, a personal relationship with God, and the importance of sharing the good news of salvation (also called the Great Commission from the book of Matthew, upon which Graham, and itinerant preachers similar to him, base their ministry). Evangelicalism also features self-conscious, para-church networks of likeminded believers. Finally, evangelicalism can be seen as an attitudinal posture with two tendencies: first, it tends toward individuation and a pietistic emphasis and correspondence between personal conversion and the subsequent transformation of character. Second, for preachers, there is a style of ministering that is built on performance standards that also distances preachers from being perceived as “performing.” Preachers are expected to let the Holy Spirit take over which draws out of their bodies a dramatic, authentic and earnest performance that is more “real” because it is closer to the Spirit that moves the message. During the years considered here, “a major religious reawakening swept across the United States” and America evidenced a habitual wariness toward non-religious social institutions and skepticism about religious and political liberalism after “so many years of upset, disarray, and death brought many people to a fresh awareness of their

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McClymond (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004) 10. In the case of Graham’s brand of evangelism, revivalism refers specifically to the organized expression (largely via services) of these goals.

spiritual need.”<sup>14</sup> With the pendulum swinging once again toward evangelism, there was also a tiring of these earlier preaching performance trends, stances developed from the deep roots of evangelicalism in American society and certain reactions against it.<sup>15</sup>

While the above elements have applied to evangelicalism historically in the nation at large, recently, evangelicalism has often functioned much more as a general faith.<sup>16</sup> Evangelicalism has served as a kind of informal establishment siding with the broader American tradition of church-state separation and denominational pluralism. Significantly, Graham was successful in bridging the national varieties of evangelicalism while simultaneously employing a style of evangelicalism that served as a conduit for socio-religious change in America and (as some outside the purview of this study argue) internationally. By changing his own revivalist performance trends, he set a new standard for all preaching performances as well as leveling the playing field for all players.

The conception of evangelicalism embraced here has a number of methodological implications that, in turn, reflect the various facets of Graham’s career. This project treats Graham, first and foremost, as an evangelist (a leader of evangelicalism), an actor-spokesperson for other Christians and Christianity as a whole, and as a celebrity icon who understood his place in American civil and social society as well as his own performance trends. Similarly, evangelicalism is seen as a faith

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<sup>14</sup> David Poling, *Why Billy Graham* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977), 13.

<sup>15</sup> See D. Bruce Lockerbie, *Billy Sunday* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1965) ch. 1.

<sup>16</sup> Samuel S. Hill, *Churches in Crisis Revisited* (Birmingham: University of Alabama, 1999) 114.

perspective and identity, but also as a posture with profound social implications (or, put more simply, as the expression of born-again Protestantism in the American public). This project explores the intersection of Christian evangelical studies, performance studies, and celebrity, seeking to avoid making either an epiphenomena of the other. Likewise, the intention here is not to reinforce what is sometimes an unfortunate division between religion and performance, and religion and celebrity studies. If performance and celebrity studies too often caricature religion and, in particular (especially in America) evangelicalism, as reflexively other-worldly or as merely a cultural component of economic conservatism, many works on evangelicalism have employed a language of insularity, focusing on the minutiae of terminology and social networks, dismissing the focus performance studies can add to the conversation. Likewise, in shielding themselves, evangelicals easily dismiss the need to be self-reflexive and to look at the heroes of movements that have led to our common modern understanding of what evangelicalism is – celebrity studies does just this by shining a bright light on the religiously famous. This project aspires instead to model a dynamic middle ground between treating religious language with the sophistication it deserves and situating evangelicalism in relation to larger performative and celebrity areas of interest. I offer a “blending model” of sorts: a description of a certain period in evangelical history in which the worlds of faith and performance at times intersect seamlessly, and in which religious and secular actors and motivations overlap and blend, sometimes without clear distinctions between them.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Two works that explore similar issues are Susan Friend Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell*:

In the life of Graham such blending was often an everyday phenomenon. This is true even though many evangelicals have historically desired to draw concrete lines in Protestant belief systems. Born into a strict Calvinist denomination (Associate Reformed Presbyterian), re-baptized as a Southern Baptist young adult, and later married into a prominent Presbyterian family, Graham knew these traditions intimately, including the Presbyterian doctrine of the “spirituality of the church” (which emphasized the duty of the church to reinforce rather than impede or challenge the social order overseen by the state) or the Southern Baptist notion of “soul competency” (which stressed the primacy of the individual soul and conscience before God). Both perspectives (and, later, their mid-twentieth century dregs) were selectively employed to truncate the social responsibilities of the church.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, while this work seeks to counter the tendency of performance histories not to take religion seriously, it also adopts a respectful hermeneutic of suspicion toward the personas in these pages who characterize their work as conversion-centered and, hence, wholly unperformed. In the blending model offered here, religion often resides at the forefront of social change, all the more so because of its power as an enduring facet of the human experience that ultimately transcends conventional temporality.

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*Fundamentalist Language and Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000) and Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001) 217-261.

<sup>18</sup> See Paul Harvey, *Freedom's Coming* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005) 24 and Charles Marsh *God's Long Summer: Stories of Faith and Civil Rights* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997) 106-112.

## Limitations & Methodology

As a case study, this project seeks to illuminate important aspects of Graham's life and career and contributes to both religion and performance studies by documenting and interpreting aspects of a Graham's life for the purpose of gaining insights into a historical period and the performance of self. Such studies, as historian Timothy Tyson has contended, illuminate "the way in which human lives point to the larger story around them."<sup>19</sup> In the case of Graham, this project also considers the ways in which he influenced the world around him, specifically defining and performing a new American revivalism, in the tradition of saw-dust trail revivalists before him, but with his own manner of speech, portrayal, and meaning-making.

## Literature Review

Biographies on Graham are extensive (there are more than 50), yet most, if not all, have not sought criticism of how Graham purposefully endeavored to not be seen as a huckster preacher in the "Elmer Gantry" vein. The first Graham biography, Stanley High's *Billy Graham: The Personal Story of the Man, His Message, and His Mission* (1956) was from an insider's perspective and reprints many of Graham's earliest sermons. The earliest full-length treatment of Graham from an outsider, historian William McLoughlin's 1960 biography, casts him as the somewhat atavistic flagship evangelist of a new Great Awakening, but sees his career in its recoil.<sup>20</sup> Neither High nor

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<sup>19</sup> Timothy B. Tyson, "Robert F. Williams and the Promise of Southern Biography," *Southern Cultures* (Fall 2002): 52

<sup>20</sup> William G. McLoughlin, *Billy Graham: Revivalist in a Secular Age* (New York: The Ronald Press, 1960).



McLoughlin describe Graham in performance terms, however. During the 1970s and '80s, a generation of scholars offered informed polemics about a Graham they viewed as an agent of civil religion and a spokesperson for Middle America. Journalist Marshall Frady's 1979 lyrical and somewhat provocative biography of Graham falls into this genre.<sup>21</sup> Frady was the first mainstream unauthorized biography, but still boasted Graham's ministry while trying to find faults. After McLoughlin's first study of Graham in a full tome, the subject elicited more attention from academics, who studied him in relation to a number of wide trends, such as Cold War religiosity and the emergence of the mainstream "neo-evangelical" movement.<sup>22</sup> Besides Graham's own autobiography in 1997 (*Just as I Am*), William Martin's excellent 1991 biography of Graham stands as the definitive work on the full career of the evangelist.<sup>23</sup> Martin provides balanced and rich scholarship and is a starting point for this project.

Absent from the list is a comprehensive treatment of what I view as the lynchpin to Graham's ministry -- his desire not to be viewed as an Elmer Gantry. In fact, this notion is only glossed over by one author, Roger Bruns, who, after researching and interviewing Graham and his associates, writes,

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<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Barnhart, *The Billy Graham Religion* (Herndon, VA: Mowbray Press, 1974); Lowell D. Streiker and Gerald S. Strober, *Religion and the New Majority: Billy Graham, Middle America, and the Politics of the 70s* (New York: Association Press, 1972); James Morris, *The Preachers* (New York: St. Martin's, 1973) 367-387; and Marshall Frady, *Billy Graham: A Parable of American Righteousness* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1979).

<sup>22</sup> Joel A. Carpenter, *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism* (Oxford: University Press, 1997) 211-232.

<sup>23</sup> William Martin, *With God on Our Side: The Rise of the Religious Right in America* (New York: Broadway, 1996). Martin reaches to link Graham with the origins of the modern Christian Right.

In November 1948 [the year before Graham went national], while in Modesto, California, he [Graham] gathered close advisers, including Grady and T.W. Wilson, Cliff Barrows, and Bev Shea, to ask their advice about the future of the evangelistic enterprise. Billy Graham had read Sinclair Lewis's 1927 novel *Elmer Gantry*, which told the story of an unscrupulous clergyman who doubted the sacred truths he preached and also had led a sordid personal life [...] The novel had enough resonance to make Graham eager to avoid any circumstances that might besmirch his own career in a manner similar to the story of Reverend Gantry.<sup>24</sup>

Graham knew how numerous evangelists, not just those who appeared in novels, had succumbed to the lure of money and power; how their careers had been shattered and their good names ridiculed and scorned. He and his closest friends and advisors decided to institute a formal bond to insulate the Billy Graham ministry from those temptations and to protect it from the appearance of impropriety.

### **The Modesto Manifesto**

In *Billy Graham: God's Ambassador*, the latest official documentary video chronicling Billy Graham from his birth to just before his wife Ruth passed away in 2007, Cliff Barrows, Graham's longtime director of music, explains that Graham was, in the 1940s, leery of some of the recent criticism the ministry was receiving. So, immediately following a 1948 ministry engagement in Portland, Graham called his inner circle

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<sup>24</sup> Roger Bruns, *Preacher: Billy Sunday and Big-Time American Evangelism* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2002) 31.

together while in Modesto, California, to explain the straits they were beginning to pass through. Somewhat prophetic, explains Barrows: Each member was asked to go back to their hotel rooms to write down the areas that had plagued ministries they had been affiliated with, or had heard about. After this time apart, they returned together to compare notes. On everyone's papers areas arose what became the basis for the manifesto:

1. The Graham team would avoid any appearance of financial abuse.
2. They would exercise extreme care to avoid the appearance of sexual impropriety.
3. They would cooperate with any local churches that were willing to participate in a united evangelism effort.
4. They would be honest and reliable in their publicity and reporting of results and never argue with local journalists reporting about the numbers of participants in the crusades.

It was later that this plan started to be called the "Modesto Manifesto." It became the centerpiece of Graham's organization and the standard by which the members pledged to operate (even providing an example to other ministries). The group also decided to incorporate as a nonprofit organization with trustees who were not family members. They became known as the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association (BGEA).

Graham also sought out advice on how to handle the BGEA's finances from Jesse Bader, who was the secretary for evangelism with the Federal Council of Churches.

"He said, 'Billy, you're going to have to do something that will take tremendous

courage. But if you do it you could set an example for all evangelists in the years to come.”<sup>25</sup> Taking Baders’ advice, Graham formed a board of trustees that paid Graham a salary comparable to the salary of a large-church pastor instead of the traditional “love offerings” handed out to itinerant preachers (the actual amount of Graham’s salary was set at that time by the Federal Council of Churches at \$15,000 per year). Graham also agreed to let the board handle the financing of all the crusades. Furthermore, in order to avoid the appearance of competing with local pastors, the group decided to visit a city only if it received an invitation by a large portion of the religious community. At that early meeting in Modesto, Graham and his associates set a pattern for financial accountability that would direct operations for years to come both for the BGEA and other ministries.<sup>26</sup>

Graham and his associates also charted a careful, if rather unusual strategy to ensure the evangelist would not be tainted by the suspicion of sexual impropriety. From that point on, Graham would not to travel, meet, or dine alone with any woman other than his wife Ruth -- even his very own daughters when they came of age. Graham tells the story of when he was walking along a quiet street with his 18-year-old daughter: the next day, the local paper printed the story that Graham was “again” seen

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<sup>25</sup> Harold L. Myra, “William Franklin Graham: Seventy Exceptional Years,” *Christianity Today* (18 November 1988) 21.

<sup>26</sup> In recent retirement years, Graham has received a salary of around \$110,000. In a 1964 BBC interview with David Frost, Graham was asked if there were things he was glad he had the money to buy. He responded, “Yes, I’m glad that I can give my family a home, and I’m glad that I can give them good food. I’m glad that I can give them a good education and those things that I think all of us want for our families. And I think that I’m also glad that I was able to purchase a television set so we could watch the Beatles.”

with a beautiful, young woman, insinuating that Graham's sexual exploits were beginning to be a problem. Graham says of the issue, "There is always the chance of misunderstanding. I remember walking down the street in New York with my beautiful blond daughter, Bunny. I was holding her hand. I heard somebody behind us say, 'There goes Billy Graham with one of those blond girls.'" <sup>27</sup> In a 1988 *Christianity Today* article, Graham is quoted as saying, "I'm sure I've been tempted, especially in my younger years. But there has never been anything close to an incident. I took precautions. From the earliest days I've never had a meal alone with a woman other than Ruth, not even in a restaurant. I've never ridden in an automobile alone with a woman." <sup>28</sup> On the more comical side, Graham is quoted in the same article, "On one of our crusades to Germany, Bev Shea, Cliff Barrows, and I went out to eat at a restaurant. The next day the papers reported that 'Billy Graham ate at a restaurant last evening in the company of a woman named Beverley Shea'" <sup>29</sup> (Bev Shea is a longtime Graham assistant, who despite his name, is a man). More recently, when Hillary Clinton asked to have a lunch date with Graham, a Graham aide pushed Clinton aside and told her that Graham never had lunch alone with a woman. According to Clinton, her motives

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<sup>27</sup> Myra, "William Franklin Graham: Seventy Exceptional Years," 23.

<sup>28</sup> Myra, 23.

<sup>29</sup> Myra, 23.

were pure, but so were Graham's. His policy to not ever be alone with a woman other than his wife was in place in 1949 as well as 2007, at 31 and at 88.<sup>30</sup>

This is not to say that the aspects of the manifesto were not already being auditioned before the group met in Modesto. They obviously had been on Graham's mind previously, but it took a book like *Elmer Gantry* to press these aspects into service. For example, even before Graham entered the national consciousness with his 1949 meetings in Los Angeles, Graham was debating, at least internally, how to deal with local pastors. During a personally financed campaign in Birmingham, England in 1947, Graham faced intense opposition from skeptical pastors. Many times before Graham, itinerant revival preachers had passed through Birmingham and drummed up local support by denouncing local clergy. A Scottish minister in a long letter to *The Scotsman* made the suggestion that the ultimate aim of Billy Graham's mission was "not the conversion of the British Isles or a revival of church life," but was disguised as "political anti-Communism."<sup>31</sup> Even a member of the House of Lords weighed in that Graham's methods were "cheap and vulgar" and "the lazy and indifferent were to be tickled to church as they expect to be tickled to death in other entertainment."<sup>32</sup> Before Graham arrived, these pastors, sure that he was just another religious opportunist, convinced the city council to prohibit him from speaking in the city auditorium. Speaking about his

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<sup>30</sup> Charles Gibson, prod., "Pastor to the Power: Billy Graham and the Presidents," Interview with Hillary Clinton 20/20, ABC, (10 August 2007).

<sup>31</sup> Charles T. Cook, *London Hears Billy Graham* (London: Marshall, Morgan, and Scott, 1954) 123.

<sup>32</sup> Cook, 123.

qualities of leadership, Harold Myra and Marshall Shelley write, “When Billy showed up, he didn’t grouse about this prohibition. Instead, he made appointments with his detractors, one by one, admitted his weaknesses as a young preacher, and assured them he wanted only to help them reach the city for Christ.”<sup>33</sup> After these meetings, the hostility morphed into fervent support and Graham was allowed to preach in the city auditorium. Apparently, the seeds of this experience helped to sow the manifesto manufactured a year later.

These manifesto understandings of what actually happened are mentioned in almost every biography including the first one by Stanley High in 1954 (there were other short, pamphlet style biographies before) who incorrectly stated that Graham’s ministry was incorporated after “a picture of Billy Graham [appeared in an Atlanta newspaper] holding a huge bag which contained this cash collection,”<sup>34</sup> (in fact, it was two of Graham’s associates holding the money-filled bags) but none connect this scenario with how Graham succeeded in generating an ethic, both on and off the stage platform, that forwarded Graham’s intention to not be seen as an “Elmer Gantry.” In effect, he sought performance techniques as well as organizational protocols to not play the role of Sinclair Lewis’ charlatan preacher.

Additionally, William Martin’s biography documents many of the evangelist’s activities, but focuses more on his progressive movement toward evangelical

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<sup>33</sup> Harold Myra and Marshall Shelley, *The Leadership Secrets of Billy Graham* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005) 46.

<sup>34</sup> Stanley High, *Billy Graham: The personal story of the man, his message, and his mission* (New York: McGraw-Hill) 153.

ecumenism. In filling a critical void in the scholarship on Graham, this project seeks to elucidate the relationship between evangelicalism, preaching, and the performance of preaching in the post-WWII years, thus contributing to scholarship on performance and celebrity studies, religious studies, and American evangelicalism.

### **Graham's Celebrity**

While this study is not strictly focused on proving Graham's celebrity status (it is more a performance study of Graham's deliberate attempt to not act "Elmer Gantry"), it is useful to reason why Graham is worthy of study in the first place. According to scholars who theorize fame and celebrity, there are many ways to become known as a celebrity, but very few can truly become famous or achieve fame.<sup>35</sup> A person can achieve celebrity status and then show longevity<sup>36</sup> in their art or craft to become a celebrity<sup>37</sup>; a person can be attached to celebrity and then become a celebrity in their own right<sup>38</sup> perhaps becoming famous for some intrinsic aspect that carries weight over time; or a person can be newsworthy through their achievements and then prove their worth to become famous. But one thing is universal among all celebrities: they must

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<sup>35</sup> See Leo Braudy, Ellis Cashmore, Richard Dyer, Joshua Gamson, David Giles, P. David Marshall, Chris Rojek, and Richard Schickel, and Cintra Wilson, just to name a few.

<sup>36</sup> David Giles, *Illusions of Immortality* (New York: St. Martins, 2000), 3-6.

<sup>37</sup> It is useful to remember that fame and celebrity are unique. Some view that fame is a limb on the tree of celebrity, while others view fame as simply a way to achieve celebrity status, while still others view fame and celebrity as entities that must move together; either way, they are universally acknowledged as fundamentally different among celebrity scholars. Furthermore, people can be famous or celebrities, while entities and objects can only be famous.

<sup>38</sup> Cintra Wilson, *A Massive Swelling: Celebrity Reexamined as Grotesque Crippling Disease and Other Cultural Revelations* (London: Penguin, 2001), 77-91.



have longevity to achieve fame. According to David Giles, there are different types of fame: “fame as immortality, spiritual fame (in the eyes of God), worldly fame (in the eyes of the public) and, more recently, fame of the moment,”<sup>39</sup> which Giles acknowledges is against David Marshall’s taxonomy of fame. According to Marshall, the term “fame” has become devalued so much that he would like a moratorium put on the use of the word for only the true, long-lived celebrities who actually have presented some value that impacts the world in a positive way (Muhammad Ali, Sister Theresa, Jesus Christ -- not necessarily in that order). Furthermore, “fame – as a psychological phenomenon – is about more than celebrity.”<sup>40</sup> Also according to Giles, celebrity is essentially a media production that occurs over time. Both Graham and his aides have said that it is the Lord, not clever marketing, that has made Graham and his ministry so successful and made Graham famous. Nonetheless, Graham has acknowledged that it has taken many years to build up true, independent media trust.

Those who study celebrity understand that there are other aspects that would propel a single person into the world perception of them as a celebrity. According to Jeffrey Williams, a celebrity must have more than anything, name recognition, which “registers naturalized attitudes and affects which make us desiring participants in that hierarchy and professional economy, as well as projects our symbolic relation to a

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<sup>39</sup> David Giles, *Illusions of Immortality* (New York: St. Martins) 3.

<sup>40</sup> Giles, 5.

public sphere.”<sup>41</sup> In fact, it is our ability to simply “remember” the celebrity’s name through a form of nostalgic reference that propels many public figures to fame.

Williams also acknowledges that there are other bases for celebrity, like working in a profession of fame, providing an example as a role model of some renown, and maintaining a consumable back story. As is typical of a singular study, Graham also fits these categories for fame: Graham certainly has name recognition; he has worked in a profession (international itinerant pastor, preaching to millions) that lends itself to being known; he is revered as a role model, not only for his Christianity, but also for how he has dealt with difficulties; he and his ministry provide an example for many para-church entities; and, his back story has become famous in his it’s own right, taking on an almost hyperbolic countenance.

Moreover, to actually make someone famous, it is useful to remember that the celebrity or the famous must have “fans” to thrust them into the level of fame. Large numbers of people must want to watch, hear, read about, and/or touch the person in question. According to Ellis Cashmore, there are two versions of the sources that created our understanding of the term “fan.” One is from the Latin term, “fanaticus,” meaning “of a temple.” This kind of fan, as a modern perception surmises, “[...] is someone who is excessively enthusiastic or filled with the kind of zeal usually associated with religious fervor.”<sup>42</sup> The alternative definition, again according to

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<sup>41</sup> Jeffrey J. Williams, “Academostars: Name Recognition,” *The Celebrity Culture Reader*, ed. P. David Marshall (New York: Routledge) 373.

<sup>42</sup> Ellis Cashmore, *Celebrity/Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2006) 79.

Cashmore, was given to the collective of patrons of prize-fighting in the early nineteenth century. “Whatever its etymology, ‘fan’ lost its religious and patrician connotations and became a description of followers, devotees, or admirers of virtually anybody or anything in popular culture.”<sup>43</sup> Whether it be celebrity, fame, or fan, coming up with denotation for either is quite difficult; it is more of a feeling, connotation, or common understanding of a public figure by many that lasts over time that truly defines whether a person achieves the moniker of being “famous.” Graham is both celebrity and famous; he has achieved properties of each.

One of the reasons for Graham’s success is his organization’s recruiting of thousands of volunteers, but Graham had his first brush with fame in 1949 when William Randolph Hearst told his newspaper chain to “Puff Graham.” Although this “famous” moment has now fallen into folklore and probably a bit of embellishment, there was not a more powerful media magnate at the time. Although Hearst’s intention was to raise awareness of Graham’s anti-communist preaching, it led to Graham being featured in over 100 nationwide newspapers within a couple of weeks. Henry Luce, founder of *Time* and *Life* magazines, went to South Carolina in 1950 to see a Graham crusade, and then formally dispatched a *Life* team there for a story. According to John Pollock’s 1966 authorized biography, the evangelist complained to Luce that *Time* had sent a “secularist, ignorant and suspicious of the concept and message of evangelism” to cover his Los Angeles Crusade in 1949. “Would you send a dress designer to cover a

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<sup>43</sup> Cashmore, 79.

ball game?" Graham reportedly asked Luce. Not a great way to welcome one of the most powerful international media bodies, but as Pollock continues, "Luce took the point. *Time* and *Life* eventually become eminently fair and objective."<sup>44</sup> Whether this is true, remains opinion and speculation, but Graham writes in his autobiography, *Just as I am*, "He [Luce] and I became very close friends. *Time* [...] pushed me all the time by carrying everything I did, almost. That gave universities and colleges a serious look at me that they would not have normally taken, had it not been written up in a sophisticated publication like *Time*."<sup>45</sup>

From those early boosts, Graham went on to become more than just a preacher on the circuit, akin to Graham's predecessors (Billy Sunday, Dwight Moody, and George Whitfield, to name a few). Graham became a commodity, the trademark of an enormous enterprise, and sometimes he belies this awareness of himself as an institution in the use of pronouns. For instance, in a 1976 interview with Mary Bishop, Graham said:

You know, I had so much coverage in the fifties. If you went through the scrapbooks<sup>46</sup> you wouldn't believe it because we received the award two years straight as being the most publicized person in the United States,

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<sup>44</sup> John Pollock, *Billy Graham: The Authorized Biography* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966) 88-89.

<sup>45</sup> Billy Graham, *Just as I am* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1997) 46.

<sup>46</sup> The BGEA kept scrapbooks of every article written about Graham from books to magazines to newspapers, totaling hundreds of pasted cutouts on black paper, now on microfiche and available at the Billy Graham Archives at Wheaton College. In the original archiving process by Graham's assistants in Minneapolis, MN, articles were cut out of newspapers and magazines, pasted into scrapbooks. Authors, newspapers, article headlines, etc, were often cut off by the original scrapbooking.

including President Eisenhower. More copy was carried on me than the President [...] Let's see, I was on the front cover of *Look*<sup>47</sup> at least seven or eight times on the front cover of *Newsweek* seven or eight times, on the front cover of *Time* only once, on the front cover of *Life* four times.<sup>48</sup>

### **Graham as Performer**

While there have been many articles and books written seeking to describe the tenuous nature of religion and theatre, it is not a difficult leap to see the similarities between preaching and acting. Treating Billy Graham as an actor of sorts helps to illuminate the nature of his performance techniques. Placing this kind of performance understanding upon Graham also helps us comprehend his ability to seek the authentic self while in performance. Graham sought to distance himself from being perceived as an "Elmer Gantry" by seeking a new performance paradigm that had at its nexus the ability to seem authentic. Graham's ability to seem authentic is based partially by his audience's determination of whether Graham is being his real, true self, while in a preaching/performance mode (audience theory suggests that while in performance, performers have the ability to see themselves as an audience would, becoming their own audience in a way, and that some performers are more adept at seeing themselves than others<sup>49</sup>). While this dissertation does not judge Graham's honesty, it is fruitful to

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<sup>47</sup> *Look* was a weekly, general-interest magazine published from 1937 to 1971, with more of an emphasis on photographs than articles.

<sup>48</sup> Mary Bishop, *Billy Graham* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1978) 36.

<sup>49</sup> Susan Bennett, *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception* (New York: Routledge, 1997) 139-162.

elucidate Graham's claims of authenticity as it is tacitly understood through performance studies. In this context however, it will be interesting to investigate what precisely "being yourself" entails. One basic contention of this dissertation is that Graham's preaching must be understood as a type of public performance; but a performance which, crucially, is not perceived by an audience as "acting." For this to be successful, the public persona of the celebrity (Graham) needs to project an aura of "authenticity," which also lays claim to a wider moral credibility.

One useful way to begin to unpack some of the issues is to consider authenticity in relation to Harvey Sacks' discussion of "doing being ordinary."<sup>50</sup> For Sacks, being an ordinary person is not something which is a given as an essential human attribute, but rather it is something that has to be worked at and practically achieved. "Being ordinary" is accomplished in the ways people tell stories about their experiences, in typically mundane ways. Even extraordinary experiences are usually told in these terms. In the telling of ordinary experience it is odd to highlight that which would not normally be noticed. However, Sacks also notes that our culture has created some exceptions to this general principle, where the mundane is given extraordinary qualities, and this connects with the predicament in which Graham often finds himself. Because it is Billy Graham, anything that was previously unknowable adds to what is known about the "real" or authentic celebrity. Celebrity know-ability is also written

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<sup>50</sup> Harvey Sacks, "On Doing 'Being Ordinary,'" *Structures of Social Action: Studies in Conversation Analysis*, Eds. J.M. Atkinson and J. Heritage (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

about by Erving Goffman who speaks of the strategy on “shifts of footing”<sup>51</sup>: Graham’s identity as speaker (animator, author, and principal) becomes conflated so that the celebrity of Graham is heightened by performing “fresh talk” in an “ordinary manner” which ultimately allows Graham to establish and further his own fame. We know Billy Graham, and his known-ness allows his audience to “own” more of his celebrity status.

Considering Graham in relation to all of the above trends entails treating him as a serious historical actor and, at times, as a powerful symbol. As suggested earlier, his familiarity and seeming consistency can sometimes dull appreciation for his complexity, not as an intellectual or original thinker, but as a public figure with a telling knack for prophetically locating the pulse of social and evangelical change. Certainly, someone who contributed more than any single person to the renaissance of evangelical Christianity in post-WWII America, who once addressed an audience of one million during a crusade service in South Korea, and who routinely met with the leaders of such nations as India, Ethiopia, and Israel scarcely requires justification as a subject of analysis.<sup>52</sup>

Yet even these high-profile achievements do not fully capture his roles as an evangelical actor and, important for this work, as self-aware performing religious celebrity. Gaining insight into this side of Graham necessitates analyzing both his private and public dimensions, weighing the Graham of crusade services and press conferences against the Graham of private correspondence and backroom consultations.

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<sup>51</sup> Erving Goffman, *Forms of Talk* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1981) 226.

<sup>52</sup> “South Korea” in William Martin, *A Prophet With Honor: The Billy Graham Story* (New York: William Morrow, 1991) 414-419.

These spheres, which sometimes (but by no means always) conflict with each other, comprised parts of his whole. In his public role, Graham was a great communicator and performer, more consistent than charismatic, with an ability to improvise and a talent for staying on task. In his private role, Graham was an energetic networker, greatly attracted to politics, and eager to seek out political leaders, socialites, and the famous. This project emphasizes Graham as an independent actor whose actions are open to a myriad of applications and interpretations.

### **Chapter Overviews**

The central story of this project concerns Graham's move away from the perception that he was "acting" like another "Elmer Gantry." Graham did this while maintaining his celebrity status and remaking the idea of evangelicalism and revivalism into his own enterprise, replete with a new understanding of what it meant to act as an evangelist, away from the cartoon preacher that was his precedent. The five subsequent chapters trace this narrative in thematic and theoretical ways from approximately 1948 to 1961, using performance theory, celebrity, and evangelical studies as underpinnings. Ultimately (and an area for future study), Graham represents a window through which to consider the relationship between evangelical Christianity, acting and preaching, and celebrity. As such, Graham suggests American evangelicalism's particular relationship to evolving evangelical currents and revivalism and evangelical public theology, while embracing traditional forms of belief, and also sanctioning new performative expressions of those same values. These dynamics have resulted in a mixture of continuity and discontinuity that has made Graham's early preaching days intriguing



and challenging to interpret. In his simultaneously influential and circumscribed roles as evangelist, celebrity peer of political leaders, and performer of proper preaching standards, Graham was both a nexus for, and driver of, many developments central to the creation of a new revivalism. Graham supplied an acceptable path upon which other preachers, itinerant or otherwise, could also recreate themselves in order to move away from a slanted public belief that Christian preachers were hucksters, unwanted and belied.

“Billy Graham, Elmer Gantry, and the Performance of a New American Revivalism” explores Graham’s emergence as a public actor on the Mainstage of American preaching in the late 1940s and 1950s. As an evangelist, he stood removed from negativity from both fellow believers and charges from outside that he was playing the role of another “Elmer Gantry” while building a theatre of players that furthered the performance of public piety.

In chapter 1, “Billy Graham’s Infamous Rise,” Graham as celebrity, both scholarly and personally, will be discussed. This part of the study provides enough biographical material to help position Graham as a celebrity worth studying on this scale as well establish Graham as the primary player in this area, capable of making decisions that, because of his celebrity, have far-reaching effects on other celebrities as well as the non-celebrity religious ministries. The chapter starts out by discussing Graham’s early brushes with fame and how Graham took fame as a tool for evangelism. Furthermore, as a religious celebrity, Graham had detractors who fought to discount or

redefine Graham's status finally leading to Graham's ability to define his celebrity on his own terms.

Chapter 2, "Graham's New Revivalism" seeks to understand the parallels between acting and preaching while positioning Graham in the revivalism tradition. This section is important because it furthers the argument started in the previous chapter that Graham had a long reach when it came to both selecting revivalist aspects of the past to help his legitimacy as well as establish a new revivalism that moved other evangelical ministries (in addition to his own) away from the "Elmer Gantry" branding. Earlier itinerant evangelists (Whitefield, Moody, and Sunday) are also examined in relation to their particular revivalism revolutions as well as how the contemporary acting theories of their day provide context to their positioning. The chapter concludes with examining how Graham, as a public actor, developed a new preaching paradigm and therefore, a new revivalism.

In "Rewriting the Script", Chapter 3, the writings of scholars, popular press, of Graham himself, and the thinly veiled movie critique of Graham in Richard Brooks' and Burt Lancaster's *Elmer Gantry*, will be used to illustrate what Graham did to his sermon scripts in response to the label of being a "Elmer Gantry" type minister. Subjects examined include Graham's changes in his attitude towards personal and corporate sin, his move towards a theology of free will, and a reconnection with the Social Gospellers of the past. In this move towards the theological center, Graham's personal theology changed, which, in turn, informed his dramatic scripts, furthering his performance of the "new revivalism." With the creation of this new scripted theology, there were

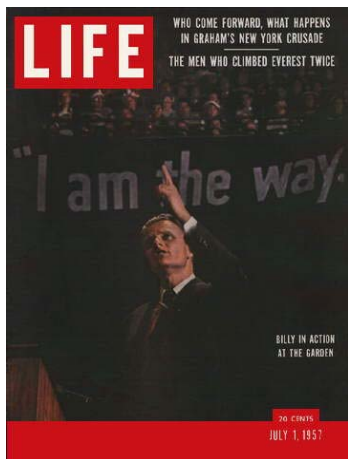
criticisms from religious conservatives that Graham was retreating from his historically Southern Baptist roots and becoming ecumenist. This part of the chapter is used to illustrate how Graham's performance of the new revivalism was intentionally centrist and that criticisms leveled in this manner further point to Graham's performance to distance himself from negative labels as an "Elmer Gantry." In return, Graham was again attacked, this time by an honored Hollywood movie, *Elmer Gantry*, whose producers sought a direct attack against the evangelist by depicting a Gantry character closely related to the real Graham persona. Comparing the movie version of the character to the living evangelist highlights Graham's tension with the label and shows how Graham pushed through the brand, further establishing Graham as the pastor of this new Protestantism.

In the next chapter, "Lights...Camera...Graham," Graham's television and radio broadcasts are analyzed to demonstrate what Graham did to push away from the "Elmer Gantry" brand in live performance, including changes in the way Graham used his body, voice, humor and shock techniques, concentration, emotionalism, and pulpit awareness. This chapter explores the rising star of Billy Graham, the way his Association used radio and film, and how television changed their approaches and Graham's stage technique. Using performances of the "original" Los Angeles Graham crusade in 1949 as well subsequent videos of his crusades (1957 - New York and 1959 - Australia as well as snippets of others) comparisons are made with how Graham purposefully changed his performance rhetoric. By drawing these comparisons, elucidations of performance techniques of Graham help to connect performance,

celebrity, and religion as well as highlight the way Graham consciously used common understandings of what certain performance signs meant to his audiences in order to create a new revivalist paradigm and a departure from cynical identifications of Graham with Gantry.

Finally, Chapter 5 draws conclusions about what Graham was trying to do with his ministry as well as what Graham felt he was forced to do in order for his ministry to achieve success. Conclusions include the creation of a new American Revivalism based on relatively foreign stage/pulpit techniques which helped to map his international ministry and establish his status as the grandfather of American Protestantism.

Motivations for Graham's evolution on all matters related to his ministry included his exposure to theological spheres outside fundamentalism, his desire to evangelize within all communities, and the way in which he set up his consortium to demonstrate an awareness of the negative label. Graham cultivated public positions and substantiated these positions during the years considered: denouncement of "extremists on both sides" of the religious debates (labeled by some as ecumenism), changing his standards to remove the appearance of impropriety in money, women, and criticism, and a move away from performative stances that allied him with others who had been labeled with the negative term, "Elmer Gantry."



## Chapter One

### “Billy Graham’s Infamous Rise”<sup>1</sup>

Many Americans, evangelical Christians as well as others, see Billy Graham as hallowed ground – stepping on him is akin to trampling the Bible. Perhaps this is why Graham has been so adept at harnessing his own celebrity while at the same time unleashing it to work for him and his ministry. The country boy from Mecklenburg County, North Carolina, is not renowned for his great intellect, academic distinctions, or novel ideas (descriptions that are purposefully nurtured by him and his followers).<sup>2</sup> Apart from his efficient and polished organization that keeps him in the public eye, even as his aging body prevents him from making any public appearances, Graham’s mystique is still a man with a contagious faith and a compelling way of selling faith to millions, even when he is no longer the lead salesperson. In a disillusioned world,

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<sup>1</sup> Gjon Mili, cover photograph, *Life Magazine*, Jul 1, 1957, ([http://www.life.com/Life/cover\\_search](http://www.life.com/Life/cover_search)).

<sup>2</sup> Much of Graham’s biography is common knowledge, having been recorded in a myriad of documentation, including the BGEA’s website, early writings by both Graham and other authors and more contemporary full-length biographies. Most biographical information contained in this chapter comes from being saturated with these sources, the most important of which are: *Billy Graham* by Stanley High (1956), *Billy Graham* by Marshall Frady (1979), *Billy Graham* (Authorized) by John Pollock (1979), *A Prophet With Honor* by William Martin (1991), and Graham’s Autobiography, *Just As I Am* (1997). When possible, these sources are cited appropriately, but because of the abundance of information and biographers, citation is sometimes difficult to manage without a multiplicity of citations.

Graham has been for many the only untarnished hero left, maybe the one lasting example of clean living, self-discipline, and good citizenship. For many, he is Uncle Sam with a Bible in his hand.

Graham, who says he's been asked to run for President, become a movie star, and start a multimillion-dollar university, works hard to hold onto that esteem. On an April 14, 1968 broadcast of ABC's *This Week*, Graham conceded his celebrity status. He told columnist Cleveland Armory that, as a celebrity, he had been invited to and had attended movie stars' parties, such as one given by Debbie Reynolds, among whose guests were Jack Lemmon, Glenn Ford, Edie Adams, and Judy Garland. A few years after Reynolds' party, Graham also accepted the invitation to attend a cocktail party and reception for top Hollywood stars at Vice President Nixon's California home.<sup>3</sup>

Some evangelicals, such as Dr. Robert W. Ross, University of Minnesota religious scholar, says that evangelicals see Graham as

Their man in the world. They think, "This is the person who is saying what I would say if I had the gifts [...] because this is the message that everybody needs." He represents an American tradition of the voice of God in the land of opposition to trends – sort of a religious fearlessness, sort of what you might call a heavenly honesty. He is America's religious world figure. To many, he is the ultimate American.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Cleveland Armory, *This Week*, ABC (14 April 1968).

<sup>4</sup> Bill Carter and Barry Jennings, prod., *Billy Graham: God's Ambassador*, hosted by David Frost (BGEA, 2006).

When people would gather below Graham at his crusades to answer his call to give their lives to Christ, many of them would stare at him, star-struck. Rev. T. W. Wilson, Graham's former top aide sums it up like this, "Just like in Jesus' day [...] they came out of curiosity or they came out of admiration or they came out of sincerity or they came out of hunger. However, they come [sic], I guess the important thing is that they come. There is the idea of hero worship."<sup>5</sup>

The list of accomplishments and appeal as a religious celebrity is staggering. He has been asked by both the Democratic and Republican parties to run as President. T. W. Wilson conceded in 1960, "They just try everyday, every way, to get him in politics."<sup>6</sup> He has held ambassadorships, been personal confidant to many presidents, even leading George W. Bush to Christ when visiting his father, former President George H. W. Bush at their retreat in Kennebunkport, Maine.<sup>7</sup> During the 1950s, Graham was asked by North Carolina Democratic leaders to fill the unexpired term of a deceased senator. Graham was once offered \$10 million and 1000 acres of prime real estate to start a Christian University and the late film producer, Cecil B. DeMille, wanted Graham to star in his biblical movies – Graham turned down all offers.

Graham has shown up in more Gallup Poll's ten most admired men in America than any other man, more than fifty times. He has received more honorary doctorates

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<sup>5</sup> Bishop, 71.

<sup>6</sup> W. Terry Whaling, *Billy Graham* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2002) 127.

<sup>7</sup> This account is detailed in a ghostwritten autobiography of Bush entitled, *A Charge to Keep: My Journey to the White House*, 2000.

than anyone can name and despite never earning an advanced degree, is called “Dr. Graham” by his aides talking about him to reporters and other outsiders. As further evidence of his celebrity status, Graham was the 1971 Grand Marshall of the Tournament of Roses Parade, the first and only clergyman honored in this way. Martin Marty, professor of modern church history at the University of Chicago Divinity School, editor of the former (self-described) liberal magazine *The Christian Century*, and critic of fundamentalism says this was perhaps the pinnacle of Graham’s career, proving his celebrity and “the endorser of America.”<sup>8</sup> Marty goes onto say that when the Cold War was at its peak and Americans were worried about their nation’s direction, Graham stepped forward to tell the nation that it was not beyond hope; “More than any other individual, he has convinced American that fundamentally we are on the right track. He very much endorses the world as we like it. A hundred years from now, people will look back and say ‘Billy Graham made America feel good’. He’s a page out of our old family album.”<sup>9</sup> He is, as celebrity scholar Jeffrey Williams might put it – recognized in part because he is so close, so much a part of the American consciousness.

Even to his critics with their back-handed compliments, in the world of celebrity, Graham has these three things going for him: he has popularity and exposure; he has celebrity by association with other celebrities; and, he connects with America because of his good-looks and his ability to project what is thought to be good about America. Furthermore, similar to politicians like George W. Bush, Graham exhibits an

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<sup>8</sup> Carter and Jennings, *Billy Graham: God’s Ambassador*.

<sup>9</sup> Martin E. Marty, “Billy Graham Made His Own mark, But He Said it was in God’s Hand,” *Star Tribune*, (May 10, 1997) 05B.



“everyman” quality that plays well to Americans, especially those open to his type of ministry. For instance, Graham’s friends and family often tell stories that portray him and his colleagues more as a bunch of endearing country rubes than the globe-trotting promotion-slick celebrities that they indeed were. For example, take this famous 1965 story from Billy Graham’s ministry:

[T.W.] Wilson was driving his boss from Atlanta to Graham’s home in Montreat, North Carolina, in a rain storm. Graham, sick and feverish after a crusade in Honolulu, was snoozing in the back seat. While Wilson was inside a Georgia truck stop getting directions, Billy went into a bathroom. Wilson drove off, thinking Billy was still napping in the back. A sleep ruffled Graham waited for his pal and then finally took a cab to Greenville, South Carolina.<sup>10</sup>

While Mary Bishop tells it most succinctly, this same story, or endearing similar stories, appears in almost every biography of Graham in one way or another. The need to depict Graham in this manner is obvious and blatant. Graham represents a certain kind of religious celebrity that has both shaped and has been shaped by his predicament. The purpose of this chapter is to explore Graham’s rise to celebrity status by looking at how he manufactured fame and how fame was thrust upon him. Accordingly, it is important to place Graham in the context of celebrity studies and to briefly list those things that make him both a celebrity in the general sense as well as what makes him

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<sup>10</sup> Bishop, 77.

unique in the world of religious celebrities. And, like many celebrities, his rise to fame was part luck, and partly the ability to seize the moment into which he had been thrust.

### **Early Brushes with Fame**

The week his 1949 Los Angeles crusade was slated to end, Billy Graham arrived in the evening at the pitched tent for this week-long event. There, Graham found reporters and photographers everywhere. Pulling one of the reporters aside, Graham asked about the sudden interest and was told it was started by a memo sent down from newspaper publisher William Randolph Hearst that said to “puff Graham.”

Apparently Hearst was so impressed with Graham’s anti-Communist rhetoric and his traditional American-Christian values, he and his mistress, Marion Davies, dressed in disguise and slipped in to hear Graham speak. This thrusting forward of Graham as celebrity was both shocking and understood as the public’s willingness and need to have a evangelical celebrity with which to identify and follow.

One of Graham’s sermons in that 1949 Los Angeles revival included one that centered on the announcement by President Truman that the Soviet Union had just exploded an atomic weapon. Graham shouted, “Across Europe at this very hour there is stark, naked fear among the people [...] An arms race, unprecedented in the history of the world, is driving us madly towards destruction.”<sup>11</sup> This blaze of nationwide publicity sparked by the newspaper magnate’s simple note to make sure Graham’s anti-communist views drew huge crowds in the following nights, prompting Graham to

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<sup>11</sup> Billy Graham, “Prepare to Meet Thy God,” *Revival in Our Time* (Wheaton: College Press, 1950) 124. (Portions of this sermon can be seen on YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CUDKehwFWjg>.)

extend the crusade one week after another. He was a sudden celebrity, eventually seeing his visage on the covers of *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *Life* magazines, and being covered by all the major wire services. His fame secured, Graham fought for lasting celebrity.

The attention Graham received after the first Los Angeles crusade astounded him: "To me it was like a bolt of lightning out of a clear sky. I was bewildered, challenged, and humbled by the sudden avalanche of opportunities that deluged me. I was bewildered because I had no formal theological training. I had never been to seminary; in college I had majored in anthropology."<sup>12</sup>

To make matters brighter, the story spread quickly around Los Angeles on November 7 that Graham had converted Jim Vaus, a notorious gangster wiretapper and minion of crime kingpin Mickey Cohen. The *Los Angeles Times* ran the story, "Evangelist converts Vaus, Sound Engineer in Vice Probe."<sup>13</sup> Rumors were rampant that Cohen would have Vaus "rubbed-out." Fearing for his life, Vaus pleaded with the evangelist to speak on his behalf to his boss (it turns out there was a contract on Vaus' life, but not from Cohen). Graham shot back without thinking, "I'll go anywhere to talk to anybody about Christ."<sup>14</sup> So, one evening Vaus and Graham secretly slipped away to meet with the mobster. Mickey Cohen was friendly but a little awed at meeting the

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<sup>12</sup> Billy Graham, "What Ten Years Have Taught Me," *The Christian Century* (February 17, 1960) 186.

<sup>13</sup> Graham, *Just as I am*, 151.

<sup>14</sup> Graham, *Just as I am*, 151.

newly crowned evangelist. He asked Graham what he would like to drink and Graham asked for a Coca-Cola, to which Cohen replied, "That's fine, I'll have one too." Vaus then told Cohen that he had come forward at Graham's tent meeting to accept Jesus Christ as his savior and this singular action had brought him much joy.

To aid in Cohen's (Jewish by birth) understanding of the moment, Graham explained the gospel as simply as he could, praying for the right words. Finally, Cohen said that though he was of a different religion, he wished Vaus well. After a brief prayer, Graham and Vaus slipped out, taking care to not be seen.<sup>15</sup> However, the next day, the visit to see gangster Mickey Cohen was plastered all over the papers in similar fashion to Graham's initial and instant rise to celebrity. Graham remembers, "To this day, I have not found out how the press knew we were there. I continued my prayers for Mickey, with the hope that he would trust Christ. I have since seen Mickey a number of times. He is now in prison, and I still pray for his conversion."<sup>16</sup> J. Arthur Vaus later became a social worker in Harlem, New York, and a youth counselor in San Diego, and often gave testimonies at Graham revivals, called "From Crime to Christ."<sup>17</sup>

Henry Luce, the founder of *Time* and *Life* magazines, went to one of Graham's crusades and also was impressed, later becoming a close friend of Graham's. Early in

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<sup>15</sup> Graham, *Just as I am*, 151-152.

<sup>16</sup> Billy Graham, "Billy Graham's Own Story: God is My Witness, Part II," *McCall's* (May 1964) 180.

<sup>17</sup> In an interesting connected side note, at the time of the abduction of Patty Hearst, Mickey Cohen claimed to know facts about Hearst's abductors and other circumstances surrounding the issue. Mickey called Patty's father "Randy" (Randolph Hearst), and met with him and his wife at "Gatsby's," a restaurant he controlled. Mickey had been friends with William Randolph Hearst, with whom he maintained a long respectful friendship.

his career, Graham apparently complained to Luce that *Time* had sent a “secularist, ignorant and suspicious of the concept and message of evangelism” reporter to cover the Los Angeles crusade in 1949. “Would you send a dress designer to cover a ball game?” Graham asked Luce. Further in his reminiscence, Graham added, “He [Luce] and I became very close friends. *Time* [...] pushed me all the time by carrying everything I did, almost.” Over time more stories appeared in the media about Graham than about the presidents at the time. In a statement that borders on sounding boastful, Graham said in an interview with Mary Bishop, “Let’s see, I was on the front cover of *Look* at least seven or eight times, on the front cover of *Newsweek* seven or eight times, and on the front cover of *Life* four times.”<sup>18</sup> Although it may be somewhat negligent reporting because of the closeness of the reporter and the subject, it is clear that Graham fought hard to make sure those covering him were given good stories (so, perhaps they would not scrape deeper for others?).

Graham is, in fact, *the* religious celebrity and had been for close to 60 years despite his simple message and modest training. The popular impact of Billy Graham is greater than that of any other preacher in history. Until 1997, his weekly radio broadcast of “Hour of Decision” was carried by more than one thousand stations around the world and had an audience of over twenty-five million. Attendance at his crusades regularly spiraled into the hundreds of thousands. Films of the crusades have been shown by more than two hundred local television stations, and are often re-broadcast in syndication. His movies and books are still enthusiastically received by

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<sup>18</sup> Bishop, 34.

millions as well. His monthly magazine, *Decision*, is still the largest independent religious magazine in the world. The Billy Graham Evangelistic Association employs more than a thousand fulltime staff members and has operating expenses of more than twenty million dollars a year. Even though he has been retired from full service going on five years, he still receives as many as twenty-five thousand letters a week. The number of converts under his ministry has passed the one million mark. Honor after honor has come to Graham, such as *Time's* "Man of the Year," the Gallup Poll's list of "Ten Most Admired Men in the World," and honorary doctoral degrees. No other preacher in history has proclaimed the gospel to more persons or seen more lives committed to the Christian faith under his ministry than William Franklin Graham.

Despite being *the* American religious celebrity, it has been a long and bumpy road since Graham's first splash on the national scene and these proliferations. After the original Los Angeles crusade, Graham became a national figure, pressing many people to become interested in his ministry. Businessmen offered their help in financing, advertising, and organizing his crusades. Through the efforts of such men the "Hour of Decision" radio broadcasts were born. The program, initiated in 1950, quickly became the most widely heard religious broadcasts in the world. Graham then expanded his ministries, capitalizing on the perks fame brought by holding international crusades, launching nationwide television broadcasts, movies, and a syndicated newspaper column entitled "My Answer."

It is no argument that Graham has earned the right to be called a celebrity, but most importantly, Graham worked diligently to achieve this success. Some might say

that he stumbled onto this road because of Hearst's admonition to "puff Graham." Others might argue that he pushed, prodded, and fought to climb the ladder to fame. The truth, however, probably lies somewhere in the middle; there had to be a certain amount of luck in it (although Graham insists over and over that it is divine intervention) but when that card was played, Graham was already holding the hand to take advantage of the fortuitous situation.

According to the BGEA's website, there are approximately 160 million evangelicals throughout the world, including about 60 million in the United States. By most accounts, Billy Graham is the leading spokesperson for Christian Evangelism. There are others who have tried to break into some of Graham's market share but Graham continues, even in retirement, to present the "grandfatheriest" face to evangelism. In 1949, after Graham's success in Los Angeles, Graham embarked on a series of U.S. and European tours, attracting audiences in the millions.

### **Born not for Fame**

William Franklin Graham, Jr., was born November 7, 1918, near Charlotte, North Carolina, to Morrow Coffey and William Franklin Graham, Sr., a successful farmer and businessman. Billy Frank, as the younger became known, was the first of four children. In 1934, while Graham was a senior in high school, evangelist Mordecai Fowler Ham began preaching at a series of revival meetings in Charlotte, brought on by a committee headed by Billy Frank's father. Ham stirred up considerable controversy with his

charges of moral laxity at the local high school.<sup>19</sup> Billy attended the meetings, partly attracted to the controversy, but while listening to Ham's preaching, Graham was led to commit his life to Christ.<sup>20</sup>

In the fall of 1936, Graham began attending the fundamentalist school Bob Jones College, then in Cleveland, Tennessee. However, he could not adjust to campus life and the formal, ultra-fundamentalism, including a staunchly segregated campus and rules governing co-ed interaction, and left after just a few months. Graham transferred to Florida Bible Institute (now Trinity College) and graduated in 1940.<sup>21</sup> While at FBI, Graham began preaching anywhere anyone would let him. This led to a "gig" at a local Baptist Church. They asked him to come back and preach a revival, but he must get baptized (by immersion) first. Graham was baptized at the church which began his affiliation with the Southern Baptist Convention.<sup>22</sup> In addition, at this time, Graham began preaching on street corners, rescue missions, small churches, and campus evangelism, developing a dual perception as partly crazed and partly prophetic.

While in Florida, he met members of the Raymond Edman family, the president of Wheaton College in Illinois. They praised Graham's preaching ability and character to President Edman who then arranged for Graham to attend Wheaton. While a

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<sup>19</sup> Mordecai Ham built his ministry on the Billy Sunday model of going on the offensive, even attacking the local clergy in many of the same ways Sunday did. Late in Ham's ministry he rejected this method, repented, and asked many of his "victims" for forgiveness.

<sup>20</sup> Marshall Frady, *Billy Graham: A Parable of American Righteousness* (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1979) 80-84.

<sup>21</sup> Graham, *Just as I am*, 39-41.

<sup>22</sup> Graham, *Just as I am*, 56.



student at Wheaton, Graham became pastor for the United Gospel Tabernacle and had other preaching engagements as well. Graham attended Wheaton College from 1940-43 and graduated with a BA in anthropology,<sup>23</sup> a course of instruction Graham considered for its helpfulness should he enter the mission field. Graham remembers, “Anthropology would give me empathy for people in social settings different from my own and an understanding of social customs and primitive religions.”<sup>24</sup>

Also at Wheaton, Graham met fellow student Ruth Bell (his future wife). She was the daughter of the Southern Presbyterian missionary and surgeon, L. Nelson Bell. The Bells had been stationed in China since 1916 and it was in that country and Korea that Ruth spent her childhood. After graduation, Billy and Ruth were married on August 13, 1943. Ruth would prove pivotal in Graham’s subsequent international ministerial forays because of the meshing of his education with her experience. Graham gave ultimate credit to Ruth for her support and grounding at the dedication of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association’s Museum in July of 2007. Ruth was on her death bed and could not attend and the first person Graham mentioned in his truncated speech was to honor his stricken wife and her invaluable effect on *their* ministry.

Graham’s first and last pastorate turned out to be at the Baptist church in the Chicago suburb of Western Springs, where he served a little over a year in the early 1940s. During his time in Western Springs, Graham took over from Chicago-area Pastor Torrey Johnson the religious radio program “Songs in the Night” (Graham’s first touch

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<sup>23</sup> Frady, 133-44.

<sup>24</sup> Graham, *Just as I am*, 65.

with media and celebrity) and preached on the program every Sunday evening.<sup>25</sup> The program was only a few months old, however, when Graham left Chicago to become the vice president of “Youth for Christ” (YFC). YFC had grown out of the enthusiastic, unconventional Christian rallies that were held all over the country in the mid-forties for servicemen and young people. For the next four years, Graham traveled all over the United States, Canada, and Europe, speaking at rallies and organizing YFC chapters. Gradually, as Graham began to hold evangelistic rallies on his own, his work for YFC tapered off, and in 1948, he resigned from the staff, remaining on the board of directors.<sup>26</sup>

### **Puff to Prominence**

Within the evangelical and fundamentalist communities in America, Graham was already quite well known because of his aforementioned ties to Wheaton, Chicago radio, and Youth for Christ. However, as was described before, at the end of 1949, he came into national prominence, somewhat suddenly, when his local Los Angeles campaign came into distinction due to Hearst’s order to “puff” Graham and Graham capitalizing on some high-profile conversions, including the underworld figure and a prominent LA disc jockey, among others. The campaign, planned for three weeks, lasted seven.<sup>27</sup> In a period of approximately six years, Graham was in the national spotlight, a comfortable place for the rising religious luminary.

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<sup>25</sup> Frady, 164-65.

<sup>26</sup> Graham, *Just as I am*, 92-97.

<sup>27</sup> Frady, 199-202.

From Los Angeles, and with soaring national name recognition, Graham had impressive turnouts in Boston and then Columbia, South Carolina, where he met publisher Henry Luce, also described earlier. During the 1950s, Graham held evangelistic campaigns in all the major U.S. cities as well as rallies in Africa, Asia, South America, Australia, and Europe – proving his international prominence. By his early 30s, Graham became something of an institution and a symbol of religion in America.

As Graham's fame increased, so did criticism that he was an "Elmer Gantry" type, that he was using evangelism to personally enrich himself and increase his celebrity. To counter some of these complaints Graham incorporated the BGEA in 1950 to provide shelter from fraud and to provide a regular business model so that individual and daily decisions could be made by many instead of just the few. While the BGEA could have chosen any name it wished, it decided to go with their namesake – Billy Graham, which, no doubt, helped to create and define the celebrity occupant of the title. In a deft move, Billy Graham became both man, movement, and institution. At the same time as this incorporation, Graham began his weekly radio program, "The Hour of Decision," which immediately turned into one of the first nationally syndicated programs; 150 stations carried the first broadcast (by 1970, over 1200 stations worldwide carried it to an audience estimated in the tens of millions).<sup>28</sup> From 1951-54, there was also an "Hour of Decision" television show, but after taking this program off the air, the BGEA did little with the medium until 1957 when it broadcast one-hour

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<sup>28</sup> Graham, *Just as I am*, 176-81.

segments of the New York Crusade. After this success, broadcasting crusade segments became the usual practice for the BGEA.

### **Media Takeover**

Shortly after the initial Los Angeles campaign in 1949, Graham was introduced to Dick Ross, owner of "Great Commission Films." During Graham's Portland campaign in 1950, Ross produced a documentary film on the crusade and its activities. Due to the film's success, the BGEA bought out Ross's "Great Commission Films," and the assets of the company were used to start "The Billy Graham Evangelistic Film Ministry," headed by Ross. The company eventually became known as World Wide Pictures (WWP); its purpose was to produce and distribute films about BGEA crusades which further increased Graham's popularity. Many of these would combine a fictional or true story of a person's conversion with scenes from an actual crusade, including portions of a Graham sermon.<sup>29</sup> Most of the films were distributed to churches and other religious groups, but sometimes to theatres for the general public as well. Although none ever received critical acclaim, let alone Oscar buzz, these films furthered Graham's "Regular American" status.

"Decision" magazine was another branch of the BGEA and endeavored to produce a monthly magazine of a few pages aimed at a general audience that would contain Bible studies, Christian teaching, brief news items, stories from church history, and articles about recent crusades, including a Billy Graham column that was then

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<sup>29</sup> Frady, 272.

syndicated in other magazines and newspapers, including a few British weeklies. The first issue came out in November 1960 and eventually separate editions were published in Spanish, French, and German as well as special Australian and British versions.

Grason Company, whose purpose was to publish and distribute books, records, music and other BGEA materials given away at crusades (pamphlets, etc.), was incorporated shortly after the BGEA itself, in January 1952.<sup>30</sup>

Internationally, there were also a number of BGEA affiliates who coordinated the showing of Association films, broadcasted radio and television programs, and made arrangements for crusades in their respective country. At one time, the BGEA had affiliates in Great Britain, Mexico, Canada, German, Japan, Argentina, Australia, France, and Hong Kong.<sup>31</sup> Besides domestic and international evangelism, radio, television, and films, Graham also took part in many literary endeavors, including authoring *Calling Youth to Christ* (1947), *Revival in Our Times* (1950), and *Peace with God* (1953) (after the purview of this study, Graham also authored *World Aflame* (1965), *The Jesus Generation* (1971), *Angels* (1975), Graham's 1997 autobiography, *Just as I am*, and the latest book from Graham, *Breakfast with Billy Graham* (2003)). He continued to write his syndicated newspaper column, "My Answer" until 2004 when his health and that of his wife started to spiral downward.

The BGEA was one of, if not the major influence on five major 20<sup>th</sup> century evangelical events: the founding of *Christianity Today* magazine in 1956, the World

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<sup>30</sup> Graham, *Just as I am*, 282-96.

<sup>31</sup> Graham, *Just as I am*, 556.

Congress of Evangelism in Berlin in 1966, the International Congress of World Evangelization in Lausanne in 1974, and the 1983 and '86 International Conference of Itinerant Evangelists.<sup>32</sup> Graham started *Christianity Today* to present the evangelical viewpoint to theologically liberal Protestant pastors and originally presented a hard line, fire-and-brimstone fundamentalist doctrine. The journal evolved, however, becoming the leading voice of American evangelicals, moving away from a strictly fundamentalist format, mirroring Graham's move to the theological center.

Since 1945, Graham and his wife have lived in Montreat, North Carolina. The couple has five children: Virginia Leftwich, Anne Morrow, Ruth Bell, William Franklin, and Nelson Edman.<sup>33</sup> Even from the beginning of his rise to celebrity and because he is tall and has a distinctive face, Graham could not travel without being recognized, further indication of his celebrity status. In fact, Graham tended to eat most of his meals in his hotel room and refused to use a private jet, feeling this would be an extravagant use of his follower's donations; so instead, he mostly traveled by commercial airliner or took the private jets of friends and supporters.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Graham, *Just as I am*, 562-67.

<sup>33</sup> In 1992, the BGEA announced that Graham had Parkinson's disease and would be easing back on his schedule and in 1996, Graham's eldest son, William Franklin Graham III (Franklin), was made vice chairman of the BGEA board. The BGEA also announced that Franklin would eventually be his father's successor when the time came for Billy to leave the ministry. In May of the same year, Billy and Ruth received the Congressional Medal from President Clinton. In late 2000, Franklin was named Chief Executive Officer of the BGEA; nonetheless, Billy still preached at crusade ministries and continued to travel around the world until 2004.

<sup>34</sup> Graham, *Just as I am*, 639.

## The Graham Critics

One's status as celebrity could also be judged by the amount of criticism they receive, particularly if they criticisms come from divergent groups; Graham has had critics of varying degrees of intensity and division. The denigration has generally fallen into four categories:

1) Fundamentalists accuse him of "ecumenical evangelism," that is, corrupting Jesus' message by accepting support from "pseudo-Christians"; Martin E. Marty wrote of Graham's fundamentalist critics,

The grand irony in his career, and one that grieves Graham – is that the most enduring resistance by the unmelted comes from people on his right, fundamentalists of the hard line with whom he associated at the beginning. They see him as a sellout who compromises his Christ by keeping company with agnostics, Jews, Catholics, moderate Protestants, the worldly and not-yet or never-won converts.<sup>35</sup>

2) Liberal Christians often write that Graham cares too much for evangelism and not enough for helping to ease the social ills of society; Reinhold Niebuhr criticized Graham for his lack of pushing justice in Graham's racial message and the shortcomings of evangelistic preaching regarding social issues. In an article written for *Life* magazine, Niebuhr criticized Graham for various inadequacies, among them his neglect "to explore the social dimensions of the Gospel." He admits, however, that Graham has

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<sup>35</sup> Martin E. Marty, "Billy Graham Made His Own Mark, But He Said It Was In God's Hand," *Star Tribune* (May 10, 1997) 05B.

“sound personal views on racial segregation and other social issues,” but Niebuhr alleged that Graham “almost ignores all of them in his actual preaching.”<sup>36</sup>

Apart from communism, however, Graham was initially reluctant to speak directly to social issues. For instance, the 1957 crusade at Madison Square Garden, Graham’s first nationally televised event, took place the year after the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. had gained a national reputation for his leadership, and the civil rights movement was building momentum. Rather than address the issue of segregation directly, Graham invited Dr. King to lead in prayer during one of the services. Some Christian leaders criticized Graham for what they saw as his failure to use his own national reputation to help advance the cause of civil rights. But sympathetic historians argue that Graham’s willingness to reach out to Dr. King sent a clear signal of support, and Graham was reported to have said that a Christian racist is an oxymoron. It has also been reported by David Aikman in his recent book, *Billy Graham: His Life and Influence*, that Dr. King told Graham to keep doing what he did best and preach to predominantly white audiences and let King do what he did best and preach on the streets.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Differing Views on Billy Graham,” *Life* (July 1, 1957) 92. Many authors, including David Poling (*Why Billy Graham*, Zondervan, 1977), completely disagree with this tact saying that serving race relations has been one of Graham’s hallmarks.

<sup>37</sup> Interview with David Aikman by Pat Robertson on CBN News (700 Club), December 18, 2007. See David Aikman, *Billy Graham: His Life and Influence* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007).



3) Some feel Graham was too close to rulers and men of power who have used him to increase their own legitimacy.<sup>38</sup> *MacLeans* was often suspicious of Graham's fondness for presidents writing in 1995, "A highlight film of Billy's life would be him on the golf course with a president. Miraculously, if we may use the term, he managed to befriend Republican and Democrat presidents alike and always showed up on the golf course with them. This may indicate a vast tolerance. Others might think it a photo opportunity."<sup>39</sup> This subject is written about in full in *The Preacher to the Presidents* (2007) by Nancy Gibbs and Michael Duffy.

And, 4) Some have attacked Graham's crusades for being mechanical spectacles that move people through emotionalism and leave little in the way of results and only serve to line Graham's (and other's) pockets in the "snake-oil-salesman" model (this notion is expanded later in chapter four). One critic of Graham's early methods described going to a Graham crusade as "this strange new junction of Madison Avenue and the Bible Belt" in which "the Holy Spirit is not overworked; he is overlooked."<sup>40</sup>

Graham rarely answered his critics, except to affirm that he felt his primary task was to fulfill the "Great Commission" and preach the Gospel, stating that he would accept help from anyone who did not place restrictions on his message, "I intend to go anywhere, sponsored by anybody, to preach the gospel of Christ, if there are no strings

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<sup>38</sup> This condemnation became particularly persistent in the mid-1970s in reaction to Graham's relationship with Richard Nixon, then enmeshed in the Watergate scandal.

<sup>39</sup> Allan Fotheringham, "A Land of Assassins and Glorious Sunsets," *MacLeans* (April 3, 1995) 68.

<sup>40</sup> *The Christian Century* (May 15, 1957) 614.

attached to my message.”<sup>41</sup> Whenever criticism was directed against Graham, he generally refused to retaliate personally. G. W. Target in the book *Evangelism, Inc.*, charges that, although Graham does not make a practice of refuting critics, he allows others to do it for him. Target says concerning Graham and his critics, “It is just not true that he never answers them.”<sup>42</sup> If Graham had a response to criticism, it was to learn from his mistakes and constantly improve his ability to deftly handle difficult situations.

### **Graham’s Celebrity Defined**

Billy Graham’s life has been one of increasing celebrity. According to the BGEA’s website, from 1962 until 1993, *Time* magazine voted Graham into the top ten of the world’s most influential men, the only person to be in the list every year for each of those thirty years. His “megacelebrity,” as Marshall Frady calls it, has translated into incredible power, but only moderate personal wealth. Furthermore, while Graham has fashioned a half-billion dollar Association, he seemingly remains a person of integrity, a rare combination. Either Graham does not have any closeted skeletons, or the Association amazingly has continued to hide them. This would be very difficult, especially considering the BGEA has its fingers in approximately 50 organizations, including its own publishing company for its books, magazines, pamphlets, a radio broadcasting company, a film enterprise that produces films for distribution, as well as multiple international humanitarian aspects of the organization. With these in place,

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<sup>41</sup> William Martin, “Fifty Years with Billy,” *Christianity Today* (November 13, 1995) 20.

<sup>42</sup> G.W. Target, *Evangelicalism, Inc.* (London: Allen Lane, Penguin Press, 1968) 117.

Graham took it upon himself to expand his ministry worldwide and in doing so, seems to have made one major compromise: from an outsider's point of view, one could say that because of his marginalization by mainstream America during the 1950s and 60s as a "fire-and-brimstone" Southern Baptist preacher, Graham moved his organization into the theological center, but by doing this, Graham was able to reach larger audiences, which, in effect, increased his exposure and fame. It is impossible to determine, however, if Graham decided to do this as a purposeful shift to remain relevant in America's religious system (and to assure his notoriety), or if Graham came to a more inclusive religiosity ideologically as a more loving and ecumenical "Man of God."

In accordance with David Marshall's request to limit the title of famous onto celebrity, David Giles has tried to develop a typology of fame as a test for the truly famous. In this, Giles asked undergraduates at Sheffield Hallam University to categorize twelve celebrities into four fields:

- 1) Public figures: famous mainly because of the professional role s/he plays in society.
- 2) Famous on merit: famous mainly because s/he is exceptionally good in her or his chosen field.
- 3) Show business stars: famous mainly because s/he works in a field which places them directly in the public eye.
- 4) Accidental stars: famous mainly as a result of forces beyond his or her control.

According to Giles admittedly limited study, Tony Blair was the most famous to the students, scoring a 34 on the scale (Richard Branson, John Major, and Prince Charles tied for least famous on the scale). But, by understanding the scale, it is fairly easy to place Graham in any of the categories mentioned above, which, if asked of Americans, could perhaps place Graham as the most famous of all, especially in his prime. Graham is both a public figure, famous for his merit, and although not a typical show business star, Graham works in the “public eye” and starred on radio, movie and television, and it could be argued that he was also accidentally famous in that it was not Graham’s doing that thrust him into the spotlight (again, William Randolph Hearst chose to “puff” Graham because of Graham’s anti-communist stance).

Depending on your religious view, Graham’s salvation could be questioned, but what cannot be questioned is Graham’s status as an international celebrity. Using David Giles taxonomy for fame, Graham is perhaps the second most famous religious icon of all time, following Jesus Christ and perhaps Islam’s prophet, Mohammed. Although Graham might deny this assertion, one thing is true: Graham had to work tirelessly to assume this role. There was a time in Graham’s ministry when he was labeled as an “Elmer Gantry”, out to fleece an unawares public and looking only to line his own pockets while pursuing nothing more than fame. In many ways, Graham has had to perform as an Anti-Elmer Gantry, going to the extreme opposite side of the evangelist norm to make sure his ministry would be taken seriously. Performing this way, Graham sought to create new evangelist performance paradigms, using his talents

for a long-lasting ministry instead of treading the same waters that so many saw-dust trail and televangelists have.

### **Authentic Shifts of “Footing”**

Though clearly in Graham’s preaching he sees his performance techniques as a way to distance himself from the “Elmer Gantry” label, Graham does this by presenting his audience with a visual rhetoric (which includes seemingly candid shots of Graham, staged shots of his preaching style, and, of course, period films featuring the all-American Graham preaching all over the world). Throughout Graham’s public life, both in public contexts like press conferences, but also in personal pieces featuring Graham at home with his children, writings detailing his “man-of-the-people” persona, enhanced by close-up camera work and distance still shots, Graham takes different stances in relation to the words he is speaking in the worlds he is speaking in; that is, in the terminology developed by Erving Goffman (1981) Graham was very adept in performing shifts of “footing.” For Goffman the identity of “speaker” contains three variables: the animator (who speaks), the author (who composes the words) and the principal (the party to whose position, stand and belief the words attest).<sup>43</sup> As a matter of course, Graham follows the normal practice of producing “fresh talk,” in an “ordinary” manner, where animator, author, and principal coincide. Occasionally however, he utters words which appear to originate beyond his authored self, where his “instincts” do the talking. In Goffman’s terms, the principal here is not quite the

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<sup>43</sup> Erving Goffman, *Forms of Talk* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1981) 226.

ordinary Graham, and he appears to be in the grip of forces which address him in the imperative to “be yourself,” potentially taking him to places he had never been before. Still, when Graham personifies his real, authentic self even where the interviewing is serious and the talk is apparently sincere, it has been argued that “What is revealed is not so much the ‘real’ or ‘deep’ personality behind the mask of celebrity. It is, rather, the fascination of the role of celebrity, both for the person who speaks about his/her own celebrity-induced experiences and for the slightly wideeyed interviewer and audience.”<sup>44</sup>

This notion of “being yourself” is an intriguing concept. Its ideological core is provided by the particular definition of individuality, discussed in media studies in relation to the persona of the Hollywood film star.<sup>45</sup> In this definition, individuals are said to possess an inner, irreducible essence, a “real self” behind whatever public face, or mask, they might project. Richard Dyer argues that popular fascination with film stars extends to discovering their true identities, as revealed on screen in moments where the acting betrays a lack of control, or off screen in what might be known about a star’s private life.

This perspective is given an historical interpretation by Christine Gledhill in her account of the “melodramatic project” of Hollywood stardom.<sup>46</sup> In this account, the

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<sup>44</sup> P. Bell and T. Van Leeuwen, *The Media Interview* (Kensington: University of New South Wales Press, 1994) 211.

<sup>45</sup> Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (London: Macmillan, 1987).

<sup>46</sup> Christine Gledhill, “Signs of Melodrama,” *Stardom: Industry of Desire*, Ed. Christine Gledhill (New York: Routledge, 1991) 207-229.

kind of behavior described by Dyer can be related to a popular cultural formation dating from the mid-19th century. Beginning with popular forms of theatre, our culture has become fascinated by a type of public performance in which signs of “real emotion” can be detected. In this definition, the truth of stage acting, and in turn, public preaching, shifts from conformity to aesthetic principle or dramatic convention, towards an emotive display in which the actor becomes the part (in cinema, method acting is the epitome of this approach; the Gaither family might be the epitome of this in stage preaching).

There is then, a complex cultural history to the type of authenticity Billy Graham was attempting to discover. From one perspective this can perhaps be characterized as a dominant ideology of individuality, variously realized in practices as diverse as forms of fandom, therapeutic counseling, and in styles of preaching performance. But a further context which has some direct relevance to Graham’s particular initiation into the subject is the professional ideology of media presentation. For instance, when speaking about key attributes of professions in theatre, film, or media communication, what does it mean to perform truthfully and thus, secure the public acknowledgement that an individual is worthy of celebrity status? Overwhelmingly and routinely, these are reduced to the imperative of being yourself, or at least, giving the appearance of being yourself (don’t let the acting show, in other words).

One approach to an authenticity study of performance was done by British media scholar Catherine Roberts of the fan community which attached itself to the

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1980–90s children’s TV presenter turned musical actor, Phillip Schofield.<sup>47</sup> What emerges is an account of media presentation where the need to perform the authentic self is inescapable. Indeed it is the fact that Schofield is so good at “being himself” as an apparently ordinary person, that is particularly appealing to his fans. Nevertheless as Roberts teases out some of the permutations in this perspective it becomes clear that “being yourself” is not as simple as it sounds. This might lead to conjecture that Schofield might epitomize a type of media personality that is relatable to the type of media personality that Graham shares. Roberts connects this to Taylor and Mullen’s concept of “pure personality” (a kind of transferable personality without a definable talent or expertise) which centers on their talent to represent their “true self.”<sup>48</sup> Such personalities do not act parts, or perform comic routines, nor do they specialize in particular fields (such as sports, cooking, or preaching). Rather, they just are, or appear to be themselves on anything from children’s TV to holiday programs (or televised crusades). Billy Graham and his entire network often seek to make sure that what you see is what you get. For instance, take these quotations from Graham researchers:

It’s the integrity of the man [Graham] behind the message that people resonated with, even people outside the camp that would be called evangelicals. He won people’s hearts because he was a unifier. He was authentic. He was a man we could trust. Especially today, people are so

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<sup>47</sup> Catherine Roberts, “Media Personality and Fan Community: A Study in Modern Communication and Culture,” PhD thesis, Queen Margaret University College, Edinburgh, 1999.

<sup>48</sup> L. Taylor and B. Mullen, *Uninvited Guests* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1986) 107-110.



jaded about evangelicalism, and with some reason. Many leaders who have asserted themselves into public positions have proven themselves to be duplicitous. Therefore, to find someone who is solid as a rock the way Billy Graham has been – by no means perfect, but he has been solid, and he has been true, and he has been unafraid. And that has won the confidence of the mainstream culture.<sup>49</sup>

And,

Moving comfortably in many spheres, Graham's role was often indirect and sometimes symbolic. In many cases, though, it was also intentional. His influence derived from his seeming authenticity and his established identity, allowing him to gracefully change particular positions and to artfully avoid specifics about more controversial subjects in a manner elected politicians might have envied.<sup>50</sup>

These gushy quotations aside, Graham offers some interesting insights into “the person who speaks” in the circumstances when he admits faults and regrets. His only full length autobiography in 1997 is full of sadness and regret; Graham even goes so far as to ask if leading a complete life for Jesus Christ is compatible with being a family

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<sup>49</sup> Kim Lawton, “Wendy Zoba on Billy Graham,” *Religions and Ethics Newsweekly* (24 June 2005): Episode 843).

<sup>50</sup> Steven P. Miller, “The Politics of Decency: Billy Graham, Evangelicalism, and the End of the Solid South, 1950-1980,” Dissertation, Vanderbilt University, 1999, 348.

man.<sup>51</sup> That is to say, if this is not simply a revelation of an essential “real person,” it is nevertheless a disclosure of a way of being a celebrity, a way of coping with its pressures, by mapping out and following through a self-conscious personal project such as an autobiography. In 1960, Graham already owned up to his failures, although he simultaneously avowed and disavowed the wrong doing, when he wrote,

How I wish I could take back some of the statements in those early days because of immaturity or lack of knowledge or experience. Many of those early statements were lifted out of context by some critics and used to ridicule the message as a whole. Then there were some misquotations which I still have to face and live down. For example, one evening in Pasadena I quoted the then Secretary of the Air Force to the effect that America had two years in which to prepare. The next day a wire service sent across the country a report saying that I had predicted the end of the world in two years.<sup>52</sup>

And then again in 1978, Graham spoke to issues relating to his move to a more ecumenical stance, developed around 1960,

I used to play God, but I can't do that anymore. I used to believe that pagans in far-off countries were lost – were going to hell – if they did not have the gospel of Jesus Christ preached to them. I no longer believe that.

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<sup>51</sup> Graham writes: “God’s ideal for the home is to have both the father and mother available to their children throughout their growing years [...] they boys, with four women in the house, needed their father at home.” (*Just As I Am*, p. 704-05).

<sup>52</sup> Graham, “What Ten Years Have Taught Me,” 186.

I believe that there are other ways of recognizing the existence of God – through nature, for instance – and plenty of other opportunities, therefore, of saying “yes” to God.<sup>53</sup>

We see in Graham the ability to recognize shortcomings, or negotiate “shifts in footing” to aid in the development of his ministry which both complicates and mediates his rise to celebrity. Graham’s ability to understand the elements of society that eventually propelled his fame, while simultaneously making statements that allowed for difference, were the real keys for his celebratory success. For Pierre Bourdieu, the ability to create and sustain celebrity is far more than the innate charisma a celebrity holds:

Let us then dispose of the idea of the notion of charisma as a property attaching to the nature of a single individual and examine instead, in each particular case, sociologically pertinent characteristics of an individual biography. The aim in this context is to explain why a particular individual finds himself socially predisposed to live out and express with particular cogency and coherence, ethical or political dispositions that are already present in the latent state amongst all members of the class or group of his addressees.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> James Michael Beam, “I Can’t Play God Anymore,” *McCall’s* (January 1978): 158.

<sup>54</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, “Legitimation and Structure Interest in Weber’s Sociology of Religion,” *Weber, Rationality and Modernity*, Sam Whimster and Scott Lash, eds., (London: Allen & Unwin, 1987) 131.

Therefore, the celebrity, in this case of Graham, must be a movable, mutable object carefully creating and recreating to align with dominant and lesser sections of the culture to make sure their hammer hits the most nails (although perhaps a crude parallel, the singer Madonna has fascinated her critics for her ability to morph and change while still remaining relevant; perhaps it is the fact that she morphs and changes which aids in her renewed fascination). Before this can happen, however, Graham must have been able to ring true to his audiences. Couple this with Graham's social views, his anti-Communism, his good looks and ability to speak the fundamentalist language of post-War congregants, and the period that Graham was thrust into (the rise of the media, the strengthening Associated Press, rise of Communism, etc.) there are ample ingredients to possibly produce a good recipe.

Audience, of course, plays a pivotal role as well, for it is the audience that ultimately determines if the actor is endowed with cultural power. Sometimes, as with this case, the media (namely Hearst and Luce) can greatly influence the choices, or at least drown out all other choices, but "The celebrity's strength or power as a discourse on the individual is operationalized only in terms of the power and position of the audience that has allowed it to circulate."<sup>55</sup> This ability to give power to the individual celebrity is parametered by the current celebrity's relationship to the shared past of the celebrity and the audience to which that individual presides. Graham, with his ability

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<sup>55</sup> P. David Marshall, *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997) 165.

to pull from past revivalists (discussed in chapter three) together with media cooperation, made it easy for his audience to push him to celebrity status.

Furthermore, taking the liberty of describing Graham as a television celebrity (after all, his rise was broadcast on television and radio, his crusades became popular entertainment, and his newsworthiness made him a household name throughout various media outlets), Marshall defines a television celebrity as one who has familiarity. Television aims to broadcast a realm of verisimilitude, to “represent a truer-to-life form of cultural expression”<sup>56</sup> to represent the real. The television is a less-embellished, less real, and closer to the everyday. Ultimately, the television celebrity seeks to deconstruct the distance between the audience and the celebrity, and to build familiarity. This is what simultaneously builds and sustains a television’s celebrity status. With Graham’s ability to negotiate this medium and build familiarity, radio built his celebrity and television pushed it into the stratosphere. For without television and radio, Graham could have just been another Billy Sunday or Dwight Moody: big for their day, but not the internationally known and beloved celebrity. Furthermore, while it could be said that George Whitefield had these attributes, Graham eventually had staying power because his crusades and radio services could be broadcast to many more people and could be rebroadcast forever, which gives familiarity more time to breed. Eventually, Graham’s propinquity as a well-known celebrity whose audiences are able to see and share with, even pray with, prompts Graham to have the appearance of accessibility. The “Grandfather of 20<sup>th</sup> century Evangelism”, as he is often called,

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<sup>56</sup> Marshall, 191.

even has a moniker that is familiar, trustworthy, loving, and accessible. Who doesn't want Billy Graham as their grandfather?

### **Fame Concluded**

In June 2005, Billy Graham preached what was to be his final American evangelistic campaign, allowing his career to conclude where it began, in New York: his first nationally recognized crusade was held at Madison Square Garden in 1957. In 2005, however, Madison Square Garden was far too small to accommodate crowds that approached 90,000 on the evening of the event, which was switched to Flushing Meadows-Corona Park, in Queens. Billy Graham, now 86, had served as America's unofficial preacher at large for over six decades. His life and ministry tracked alongside some of America's most dramatic moments. And in more than a few instances, Graham was a player in the drama. He rose to national prominence during the height of the Cold War, preaching vigorously against the evils of "godless communism." For the most part, Graham had traveled a middle course between liberal and conservative evangelicals, with a focus on changing people by means of a unifying message rather than changing laws to reflect evangelical social concerns. Over the years, this middle course brought criticism from all sides. But in a time of shrill and divisive religious rhetoric, Graham's simple message of faith rang with refreshing authenticity, almost in despite his meteoric celebrity.

## Chapter Two

### “Graham’s ‘New’ Revivalism”

In 1995, clutching his black bible in one hand (the same bible that had seen him through nearly 100 million other faces) and a black microphone in the other, Billy Graham stood outside in the howling, dry wind in San Juan, Puerto Rico, near the Hiram Bithorn Stadium. Fittingly, Graham was to preach in the city named after the prophet who ushered in Jesus Christ’s ministry – St. John the Baptist. A satellite dish in the background was only one piece of technology that had been assembled for this colossal purpose – to proclaim the “Good News” of Jesus Christ. The Billy Graham Evangelistic Association had worked for more than a year to coordinate the largest single evangelistic effort in the history of Christianity. That year, from March 16 through 18, Graham’s preaching was transmitted to thirty satellites across twenty-nine time zones for a total of 300 hours of transmission. His words were interpreted into forty-seven languages. Musical clips and testimonies appropriate to various areas of the world were spliced into regional programs, including a testimony in Mandarin by tennis star Michael Chang. Thousands of venues around the globe were set up to receive the messages and project them on video screens. The settings ranged from a refugee camp in Rwanda to the rain forests of French Guiana. The largest hall in Burundi was packed, with many looking in through the windows and doorways. In Cameroon, more than two thousand responded to Graham’s invitation to publicly accept Christ. In Bangladesh, nearly twenty-five percent of the four thousand who attended gave their lives to Christ.

The numbers tabulated after the event are staggering: 185 countries, messages heard in 117 languages, 3000 missions locations involved, over 10 million seats occupied per night, over 1 million Christian workers trained in preparation (not including 500,000 prepared counselors), and 1 billion people viewing the broadcast in 117 countries over the three days.<sup>1</sup>

Billy Graham has preached the Gospel message to more people in live audiences than anyone else in history – over 210 million people in more than 185 countries and regions during his more than 350 crusades. Of this Graham responded, “I don’t know why God has allowed me to have this, I’ll have to ask him when I get to heaven.”<sup>2</sup> Graham’s ministry reached hundreds of millions more through television, video, film, radio, serial newspapers, and almost all other media forms. Despite all these numbers, on a 1999 “Larry King Live” program, when asked how he wanted to be remembered, Graham responded, “I want to be known as someone who was faithful. When I reach heaven, the Lord will respond, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into rest.’”<sup>3</sup>

There are two ways to explain why Billy Graham became the best-known evangelist in the world. First, to the faithful, he has the power of God behind his ministry. At least, that’s the primary reason Graham gives for his success. In conjunction with this, he has been endowed with everything an evangelist needs for broad appeal. “He is a compelling physical figure,” writes Mary Bishop. Bishop likens

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<sup>1</sup> Whalin, 9-10 and Graham, *Just As I Am*, 634-50.

<sup>2</sup> Nancy Gibbs and Richard N. Ostling, “God’s Billy Pulpit,” *Time* (November 15, 1993): 70.

<sup>3</sup> Larry King, Prod., Interview of Billy Graham, *Larry King Live*, CNN (29 June 1999).



Graham to a majestic Charlton Heston, with a handsomeness and mighty voice that rivals great politicians.<sup>4</sup> As people who tried to get him to run for public office know, Graham inspires confidence – something that is important for every evangelist.

Secondly, Graham is a product of a revival history that he and his contemporaries have capitalized upon to build a sophisticated organization that has continued to pioneer in adapting evangelism to television and other media, changing revivalism throughout the world in ways that simultaneously made it easier to preach, but more difficult to remain in the pulpit because of the media's ability to inflict damaging information as well. When other evangelists were getting bad press, however, Graham had early support from two of the nation's most prominent press giants, William Randolph Hearst (San Francisco Newspaper magnate) and Henry Luce (founder of *Fortune*, *Life*, *Time*, *Sports Illustrated* and others). Added to this, Graham learned from his historical lineage that to be ultimately successful, especially in his time, he should preach in a way as to not demand economic self-denial (so as to not turn off the rich, the powerful, the conservative and the patriotic) and not confuse people of simple faith. In glowing terms, Graham offers forgiveness and everlasting life to people haunted by guilt for their inherited American blessings as well as those afraid of damnation for their past – it's a win-win situation for all who listen to Graham.

### **Graham's Unique Evangelistic History**

There is a unique history behind Graham, but a history built on the traditions and preaching styles others before him. In fact, Graham inherited more than 200 years

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<sup>4</sup> Bishop, 27.

of experimentation of preaching performance by American evangelists. First, Graham built on George Whitefield's infectious and international eighteenth century preaching which made the grimmest, most fatalistic Calvinists believe they might have a chance in heaven, creating an optimism that was lacking in Baptist circles before him. There were others as well: Charles Grandison Finney's nineteenth century practice of having people come forward to the "anxious seat" to be saved at the end of mass meetings held in a former theatre; Dwight L. Moody's heavy emphasis on the Bible in the late nineteenth century and his incredibly in depth organizational techniques; and farm-boy Billy Sunday's efficient, yet circus-like crusades and backing by wealthy American aristocrats. Add to this heredity, Graham's understanding of the necessities of his new audience to use amplification for his messages while using new mediums, such as TV, radio, print, film, et al, and to deliver his sermons in an intimate, folksy manner. Furthermore, Graham understood the importance of preserving his ministry for the future; in comparison, perhaps three thousand of Bob Jones, Sr.'s (to which Graham owes a small debt considering Jones was one of the first to have success using new forms of media) approximately ten thousand radio messages survive.<sup>5</sup> By comparison, all of Graham's radio, television, and film broadcasts are extant.

Graham admits, "I'm not a great preacher as analyzed by clergy or professors in seminaries, and if you read the sermons that evangelists have preached down through

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<sup>5</sup> Daniel L. Turner, *Standing Without Apology: The History of Bob Jones University* (Greenville, SC: BJU Press, 2001) 12, 59.

the centuries, I think you'll find the same thing."<sup>6</sup> There are many evangelists who share Graham's beliefs and it should be stated that Graham is not the first to attract big crowds for evangelism. In fact, in Graham's sixteen week 1957 crusade in New York City, he drew 2,397,000 people.<sup>7</sup> By comparison, Billy Sunday attracted 1,443,000 in his ten week campaign there in 1917, only approximately 5,500 fewer people a week than Graham.<sup>8</sup> With this said, Billy Graham personifies evangelism to a far greater extent than his predecessors and contemporaries mostly because both Graham and television were born as a public phenomena at about the same time, the late 1940s, and because the Graham Association has been able to use new media forms so well and shed negativity so adroitly. Of Sunday and Moody, Graham said in 1954, "I have the greatest respect for Billy Sunday though our methods are different and some of our emphases are different because we are living in two different periods [...] I would say that our meetings are more along the lines of the Moody meetings of about 75 years ago."<sup>9</sup> Although, Graham does not admit it here, media and media attention separates Graham from all other revivalists in both world strategies, media attention, the use of

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<sup>6</sup> Margaret Shannon, "Where Billy Graham's Sawdust Trail Begins," *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution Magazine* (January 25, 1970) 8.

<sup>7</sup> George Burnham and Lee Fisher, *Billy Graham and the New York Crusade* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1957) 144. Also, "The New York Crusade", 1957, film provided by the Billy Graham Research Center, Wheaton College, Wheaton, Illinois.

<sup>8</sup> Dick Jenson, *The Billy Pulpits Chronicles of Billy Graham and Billy Sunday* (Minneapolis: First Foundations, 1996) 88.

<sup>9</sup> *U.S. News and World Report* (August 27, 1954): 70.

media in his ministries, and a definite performance paradigm shift in the way Graham and his ministry carried their new brand of revivalism.

American religious history shows that at the end of World War II, the demand for evangelists outstripped the supply. In our current electronic age that crowds our heads with familiar faces and names and instant word associations, Billy Graham has become synonymous with evangelism as Apple is with iPod. Post-World War II America was ripe for a New Revivalism, although few knew this, or even attempted to do anything about it. Coming out of the most dangerous and violent time in world history, America turned as a nation of seekers: church membership, sales of religious books, and enrollment at religious institutions were all on the rise.<sup>10</sup> After World War II, Religious performers were simultaneously making Christianity a worthwhile cause as well as a cause for ridicule and revulsion. There were those who used the upwelling of revival support to capitalize on the ignorance of the flock. Graham sought to use the good of the past to build a new revivalism for the future.

Like all itinerant preachers, Graham is a part of an American tradition of traveling religious orators, or what could be referred to as “pulpit-actors,” which with passion, idealism, and self-conscious performance trends, influenced America since its earliest colonial days: Whitefield, Finney, Moody, and Sunday. Graham’s new revivalism has a history, one that is steeped in tradition, new theological thought, and performance paradigm shifts.

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<sup>10</sup> Wylene Rholetter, “Billy Graham,” *St. James Encyclopedia of Pop Culture* (New York: Gale Group, 2002) 341-345.

## Preaching and Acting

This study, however, is not the first to draw connections between preaching and acting. Performance studies theorists such as Richard Schechner and Victor Turner have authoritatively connected the religious and performance spheres in our time (although medieval thought connected these two seemingly disparate spheres quite easily), be it the Ndembu tribes of Africa or quasi-religious followers around the world. The opening line of Turner's last chapter in *From Ritual to Theatre*, "Acting in Everyday Life and Everyday Life in Acting," states, "Acting, like all 'simple' Anglo-Saxon words, its ambiguous – it can mean doing things in everyday life, or performing on the stage or in a temple."<sup>11</sup>

Richard Schechner took Turner's ideas and expanded them, essentially taking credit for starting the popular "performance studies" trend. Schechner writes, "many religious rituals include activities that are decidedly worldly or non-transcendent [...]. Additionally, many, perhaps most, rituals are both secular and sacred."<sup>12</sup> Of course Schechner goes on to unpack and expand this statement, but there is a definite confluence for these two stalwarts in the realm of performance studies between acting and those who take on the "role" of preacher, be it shamans, wedding officiate, or 1940s Baptist revivalist.

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<sup>11</sup> Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982) 102.

<sup>12</sup> Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Routledge, 2002) 53.

On the other side of the coin in this study, Jana Childers has written a book from a preaching point of view making links with religious terms such as creation, incarnation, and transformation with those from acting as well as stating that both “hold up a mirror to life.” She even quotes Thomas Betterton, leading 17<sup>th</sup> century Restoration actor who is buried at Westminster Abbey, as a useful chastisement, “Actors speak of things imaginary as if they were real, while you preachers too often speak of things real as if they were imaginary.”<sup>13</sup> Moreover, there have been multiple articles written in academic journals such as *Literature and Theology*<sup>14</sup> and *The Journal of Religion and Theatre*, including Childers’ longing for preachers to get “actor” training to help relate and recall messages in “Making Connections: Preaching as Theatre.”<sup>15</sup> In 2003, Herbert Sennett tried to expand Schechner’s performance theories “to formulate a basic analysis of Christian preaching as a first step to the development of a model for Christian preaching as performance.”<sup>16</sup> Sennett’s discussion expands on a 1999 book by Cleophus James Larue called *The Heart of Black Preaching*<sup>17</sup> and tries to reposition Larue’s performance theories set mostly in the African American church to that of the white church as well.

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<sup>13</sup> Jana Childers, *Performing the Word: Preaching as Theatre* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998) 28.

<sup>14</sup> Claire M. Waters, *Angels and Earthly Creatures. Preaching, Performance, and Gender in the Later Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

<sup>15</sup> Reverend Jana Childers, “Making Connections: Preaching as Theatre,” *The Journal of Religion and Theatre* (Vol. 4, No. 1, Summer 2005) PDF File Pages 1-7.

<sup>16</sup> Herbert Sennett, “Preaching as Performance: A Preliminary Analytical Model” *The Journal of Religion and Theatre* (Vol. 2, No. 1, Fall 2003) PDF File Pages 141-156.

<sup>17</sup> Cleophus James Larue, *The Heart of Black Preaching* (Phoenix: Westminster Press, 1999).

At the root of the discussion is the understanding of preaching and theatre as separate-but-related art forms. They share the essential characteristics and qualities that can be said to be true of art in general: an interest in exposing a piece of the human condition for group gain in ways that point to another realm. In addition, aesthetic distance plays a role; both acting and preaching are mimetic, and may be prophetic as well. In addition, like all performance arts, theatre and preaching are communal in nature and empathy-based. The intention of this study is not to prove the connections between preaching and acting, nor is it to be an exhaustive examination of four preceptors of Graham -- Whitefield, Finney, Moody, and Sunday -- but to shed light on Graham's ability to simultaneously distance himself and pull from the revivalist traditions and performance theories that were impacted by the acting of the day, creating a "New Revivalism" based on a new performance paradigm and religious rhetoric, even though it is also a pastiche of old forms. In fact, there are historical connections between acting and preaching that have created a revivalist tradition to which Graham owes his success. This chapter seeks to elucidate these connections and history.

### **Historical Context**

To fully understand Graham's "New Revivalism," historical context is needed to position Graham's media addition to the revivalist performance tradition. Historically speaking, there seems to be several conditions which must combine in order to produce the climate in which revivalism can flourish. The most important of these conditions is

a basic shift in the “emphasis of theological thought within Protestantism.”<sup>18</sup> This shift is invariably connected with a general reorientation in American society at large which also produces important alterations in the organizational structure and leadership of the Protestant churches – of which, Billy Graham both instigated and capitalized upon. There were four such basic shifts in Protestant thought before Graham, fueled by the four revivalists acknowledged above, since the Puritans first settled in Massachusetts Bay, and each of them has produced a period of revivalism so profound and far-reaching as to be called a “great awakening.”<sup>19</sup>

### **George Whitefield & The Great Awakening**

Revivalism, to which Billy Graham was both an inheritor and a propagator, owes its American roots to George Whitfield, beginning with a remarkable revival movement that swept through the British colonies of North America between 1720 and 1744. Historians call it *the* Great Awakening. The revival transformed the religious and moral character of North America and shaped the nature of American Christianity. To this day, Billy Graham and American evangelism bears the imprint of the Great Awakening and Whitfield. From a broad historical perspective, the Great Awakening was part of a general awakening that affected Great Britain and Northern Europe. William Sweet explains this phenomenon in his 1944 tome, *Revivalism in America* (credited as the first comprehensive study of American Revivalism):

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<sup>18</sup> John Mark Terry, *Evangelism* (Nashville: Broadman and Holdman, 1994) 113.

<sup>19</sup> Mark A. Noll, *Evangelicalism: Comparative Studies of Popular Protestantism in North America, The British Isles, and Beyond 1700-1990* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) 3-13.



What we have come to call pietism lies at the heart of great colonial awakenings. By pietism, we mean a type of religion which places the principal emphasis upon that which is often termed a religion of the heart, rather than a religion of the head. It is a religion which appeals primarily to the emotions. Its principal theme is redemption for individuals. Its object is to awaken men and women to a personal repentance.<sup>20</sup>

This new “emotionalism” greatly informed Great Awakening revivalists, many of whom sprang from the ground in America while others were transplanted from Britain.

This first of these awakenings took place in the years from 1725 to 1750.<sup>21</sup> This was the “awakening” which is most commonly associated with Jonathan Edwards, Gilbert Tennent, and Whitefield. Theologically it was the end of the old seventeenth-century form of Calvinism which the Puritans (and Presbyterians) had brought from Britain and marked the beginning of a new kind of Calvinism. This Calvinism, which might be called evangelical Calvinism, deemphasized the doctrine of predestination (one of Calvin’s central doctrines) and instead, played up the need for the sinner to demonstrate a forceful faith – built in large part on Matthew 28’s “Great Commission.” In association with this evangelical Calvinism, George Whitefield’s “revival preaching was novel both for his shameless pathos and for his equally shameless self-promotion

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<sup>20</sup> William Warren Sweet, *Revivalism in America* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1944) 24-25.

<sup>21</sup> The English Puritan movement in the first half of the seventeenth century could also be labeled an “awakening,” but since the settling of Massachusetts Bay was only a peripheral aspect of this movement, the first great awakening in America is widely acknowledged as the one that took place from 1725-1750.

through the press.”<sup>22</sup> Whitefields’ greatness also was found in his ability to integrate religious discourse with the emergence of a consumption-oriented society. “In the fields of London he discovered [...] how to play a religious trade in the open air marketplace. By making religion dramatic and entertaining [...] he led the way in showing how religion could be made *popular*” which consequently made his followers behave as if they were religious consumers.<sup>23</sup> In short, Whitefield made revivalism dramatic, transforming the pulpit into a form of sacred theatre, akin, at least in principle, to medieval theatre which combined the dramatic with the sacred. More than any of Whitefield’s peers (or successors), he spoke to the passions of his congregations. While other revivalists, including Stoddard, both Wesleys, and Edwards, spoke to the affections of Christ, none did so with the powerful, visceral exaggeration of Whitefield’s performance style.

Unlike other evangelical leaders who followed in their father’s footsteps, Whitefield grew up in a tavern and had an early love affair with the English stage and acting. At twelve, he was placed in the School of Saint Mary de Crypt in Gloucester, where he displayed an interest in rhetoric and drama. After his conversion at Oxford, where he met John and Charles Wesley and joined the Holy Club which was devoted to methodically carrying out religious duties, Whitefield renounced the theatre in its

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<sup>22</sup> Harry S. Stout, “George Whitefield in Three Countries,” *Evangelicalism*, eds. Mark A. Noll, David W. Bebbington and George A. Rawlyk (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) 59.

<sup>23</sup> Stout, 59.

entirety, but at the same time, borrowed its secrets for the pulpit.<sup>24</sup> After Whitefield, it would never again be entirely clear what was stage and what was church.<sup>25</sup>

But what about the theatre and acting was similar to preaching during Whitefield's era? First, and most important, was the stage's emphasis on passions and feeling rather than abstract thought and understanding. Actors declaimed, as did preachers. Where other revivalists appealed to the heart only after informing the head, Whitefield went directly for feeling. In the treatise on acting *To the Actor*, Michael Chekhov observes, "It is well known that the realm of art is primarily the realm of feelings. A good and true definition would be that the atmosphere of every piece of art is its heart, its feeling soul. Consequently it is also the soul, the heart, of each and every performance on stage."<sup>26</sup> Great art, in the form of drama, may have superficial or simplistic plots and content, but in Whitefield's day (and some would argue, in ours as well), that rarely mattered; it was the passions of the actor that counted, and it was the passions to which the audience responded in the shared experience.

Even Benjamin Franklin confessed that he was moved by Whitefield's emotional and persuasive powers and wrote that Whitefield had one of the greatest speaking voices the world had ever known. Franklin wrote that Whitefield's voice had perfect

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<sup>24</sup> Harry S. Stout, *The Divine Dramatist: George Whitefield and the Rise of Modern Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) 113-132.

<sup>25</sup> For more insight into George Whitefield, see Arnold A. Dallimore's two-volume *George Whitefield: The Life and Times of the Great Evangelist of the Eighteenth Century Revival* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1980) and Frank Lambert's "*Peddler in Divinity*": *George Whitefield and the Transatlantic Revivals, 1737-1770* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

<sup>26</sup> Michael Chekhov, *To the Actor: On the Technique of Acting* (New York: Harper, 1953) 53.

modulation, emphasis, and gave the effect of “an excellent piece of music.”<sup>27</sup> During Whitefield’s lifetime there were widespread reports that his voice could be heard for more than a mile. Franklin doubted the report that 25,000 people at a single gathering were able to hear Whitefield preach, so he made a personal study of the matter and recorded the results in his autobiography:

He had a loud and clear voice, and articulated his Words and Sentences so perfectly that he might be heard and understood at a great Distance, especially as his Auditories, however numerous, observ’d the most exact Silence. He preach’d one Evening from the Top of the Court House Steps, which are in the Middle of Market Street, and on the West Side of Second Street which crosses it at right angles. Both Streets were fill’d with his Hearers to a considerable Distance. Being among the hindmost in Market Street, I had the Curiosity to learn how far he could be heard, by retiring backwards down the Street towards the River, and I found his Voice distinct till I came near Front-Street, when some Noise in that Street obscur’d it. Imagining then a Semi-Circle, of which my Distance should be the Radius, and that it were fill’d with Auditors, to each of whom I allow’d two square feet, I computed that he might well be heard by more than Thirty-Thousand. This reconcil’d me to the Newspaper Accounts of his having preach’d to 25,000 People in the Fields, and to the ancient

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<sup>27</sup> Leonard W. Labaree, Ralph L. Ketcham, Helen C. Boatfield, and Helene H. Fineman, eds., *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964) 180.

Histories of Generals haranguing whole Armies, of which I had sometimes doubted.<sup>28</sup>

Envyng Whitefield's abilities, Graham writes, "I remember reading that George Whitefield had preached there [Boston] in 1740 to many thousands of people without benefit of an amplification system. What a voice he must have had!"<sup>29</sup> In directing his message to the heart and the experience of the New Birth, Whitefield preached with his entire body, as well as soul, making Whitefield's use of the body more in the nature of the stage than the pulpit. Passion-based art like theatre depends almost completely on the voice and body, which in Chekhovian terms, becomes "the instrument for expressing creative ideas on stage."<sup>30</sup> In many ways, Whitefield's actor-preacher style anticipated the contemporary "method acting" proposed and described by Lee Strasberg in *Dream of Passion: The Development of the Method*.<sup>31</sup> In this sense, Whitefield was actually choosing to model himself after the acting of the day, especially in how Denis Diderot conventionalized the art. Diderot's "allowance for the role of the unconsciousness in the creative process, his emphasis on the organism's capacity to remember and imagine sensation and emotion, his prophetic insistence that mind and

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<sup>28</sup> Labaree, 179.

<sup>29</sup> Graham, *Just as I am*, 167.

<sup>30</sup> Chekhov, 1. See also Stanislavski, "When Acting is an Art." *An Actor Prepares*, 12-30.

<sup>31</sup> Lee Strasberg, *Dream of Passion: The Development of the Method* (New York: Little, Brown, 1987). Many question Strasberg being the first to employ these ideas; see Joseph R. Roach, "Changeling Proteus: Rhetoric and the Passions in the Seventeenth Century," in *The Player's Passion: Studies in the Science of Acting* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1993) 23-57.

body are inextricably interwoven”<sup>32</sup> parallels Whitefield’s interaction with his craft and his ability to simultaneously act and react within the confines of his own performance paradigm. As a prelude to his sentimental play, *Le Fils naturel* (1757), entitled *Les Entretiens sur Le Fils naturel* (*Conversations on Le Fils naturel*), Diderot announced the principles of a new drama, which opposed the stilted and rigid conventions of the classical French stage and called for a serious, domestic, bourgeois drama of real life, saying “Only passions, great passions can elevate the soul to great things.”<sup>33</sup> Whitefield embodied passion, probably learned from his forays on the boards when he was younger.

### **Graham and Whitefield**

Where most intellectually oriented disciplines such as preaching or lecturing express their creativity through the content of their thought, actors predominantly exhibit their creativity through their bodies; in fact, some have surmised that the actor shows the window to the soul through voice and body. The effect of all of Whitefield’s innovations was to free his body for performance, an affectation that carried all the way through to Graham. Additionally, outdoor settings and extemporaneous speech freed and animated Whitefield’s body to move, oftentimes vigorously, a characteristic trait noted in virtually every description of his preaching<sup>34</sup> and often of Graham. In

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<sup>32</sup> Roach, 157.

<sup>33</sup> P. N. Furbank, *Diderot: A Critical Biography* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1992) 188.

<sup>34</sup> See Stuart Henry’s *George Whitefield: Wayfaring Witness*, Arnold A. Dallimore’s *George Whitefield: The Life and Times of the Great Evangelist of the Eighteenth Century Revival*, and Harry S. Stout’s *The Divine Dramatist: George Whitefield and the Rise of Modern Evangelicalism*.

comparison, take this extended description of Graham's preaching in 1978 by Mary Bishop, a Graham insider:

Graham looks venerable, like an old eagle, with his silver sideburns, his sharp nose and his gaze made more formidable by the deep frown wrinkles between his frosty eyebrows. For those who respond with awe to strong male body language, Graham is a magnificent specimen, a Valentino for the Lord.

The jaw is firm and snaps shut in teeth-grinding seriousness after a biting remark. The face is stern, almost angry. There were no gestures of equivocation, no apologetic mannerisms. The head doesn't tilt in a pleading gesture. There is no squinting, no shoulder-shrugging, no lip-puckering, no sweet talk.

His urgings are more commands than pleadings, and his forceful gestures are an effective accompaniment. His index finger chops the air, jabs at his audience. His fists thrust forward [...] "God is speaking to you tonight," he says, hypnotically. "There a little voice that says you should come. You're resisting."

Billy Graham must have a diaphragm of steel. With the force and clarity of a veteran King Lear, he "Pro-o-o-JECTS!" his voice, as his aide T.W. Wilson says, to the last row of the uppermost tier of a coliseum.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Bishop, 37.

If we substituted the name of Laurence Olivier, this “performance” description could be suitable for actor instead of preacher. Whitefield’s amiable ability to couple stage emotionalism with platform preaching ushered into revivalism a new performance paradigm, one that Graham was eventually able to use and capitalize upon. For Whitefield, the movement, emotionality, and exhaustion that often accompanied his revivals became more inventive and bolder the more he experimented with this new performance preaching paradigm which allowed the actor-preacher to situate religion in a different context.

Furthermore, central to Whitefield’s evangelical revivals was less the creation of a new denomination than an international movement centered on revival that spanned two continents (again, a trait that Graham was able to also use, but for Graham, two continents would not be enough; he went all over the world setting up revivals). For Whitefield, this innovative revival-centered world, Michael Crawford surmises, “set evangelicals apart from nonevangelicals.”<sup>36</sup> Before Whitefield, revivals were local, or at most regional, and episodic by nature. All of that changed with Whitefield and his single-minded determination to market revivals internationally. Also, Whitefield undoubtedly used his theatre training to make sure multiple day revivals held a storyline, which reduced the episodic nature of revivals up to that time. Graham too would create his revivals with the intention of narrating the story of the Kingdom of God throughout the days his tent would stand. In fact, knowing how powerful

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<sup>36</sup> Michael J. Crawford, *Seasons of Grace: Colonial New England’s Revival Tradition in its British Context* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1991) 127.



Whitefield's sermons were, Graham admits to using Whitefield's sermons as impetus for his own, "Incidentally, I borrowed Whitefield's topic for my sermon that day: 'Shall God Reign in New England?'"<sup>37</sup>

Mary Bishop went so far as to quantify Graham's story-making techniques, explaining what Graham would preach on in successive nights. For a seven-day crusade for example, the first day would be "The Sinner's Scene-Setter" ("You're confused. You're empty. You're mixed up...Many of you are suffering from religious or spiritual vertigo"); Day 2: "The Threat" ("The time of your death has already been set...Are you prepared to die?...There are thousands here tonight who are in the tomb of sin"); Day 3: "The Reminder of Powerlessness Without God" ("You yourself do not have assurance and certainty...You need forgiveness, hope, assurance, confidence"); Day 4: "The Urgent Reality" ("This may be the most important hour you have ever spent. This hour may be the hour for which you were born. The decision you make tonight will decide for many of you your marriage, your vocation, your eternal destiny...Think about it...Just talk to the Lord like you would your best friend"); Day 5: "The Promise" ("You can come to Christ tonight and have your whole world turned around...All you have to do is say, 'Jesus, have mercy upon me'...He can heal the wounds of your soul tonight...The lowly, miserable, low-down alcoholic, you come"); Day 6: "The Guide" ("This," he says, holding up a Bible in his palm like a waiter proudly hoisting his chef's finest soufflé, "is the compass"); Day 7: "No Stone

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<sup>37</sup> Graham, *Just as I am*, 167.

Unturned” (basically summarizing the week’s message and successes).<sup>38</sup> This kind of storyline to a revival was started by Whitefield, but perfected by Graham’s ministry. Whitefield’s internationalism, emotionalism, and his use of a continuing story proved very influential to Graham’s understanding of how to perform a revival.

### **Charles Grandison Finney and the Second Great Awakening**

The second great shift in American Protestant thought occurred in the opening years of the nineteenth century. The leading figures associated with this second great awakening were Timothy Dwight, Lyman Beecher, Charles Grandison Finney, and a host of camp revivalists who brought a new religious fervor to the expanding frontiers. In this awakening, the concepts of free will and free grace (the belief that God offered salvation freely to all who believed in Christ on faith), which had only been implicit in the preaching of the first great awakening, became much more explicit. In theological terms, Arminianism (the belief that Christ died for all people and not only for the elect) replaced Calvinism (the belief in predestination) between the years 1800 and 1835 in popularity and growth. Thus the intellectual currents which had brought the separation of church and state in America after 1776 produced not only the self-reliant individualism of the frontier, but also an individualistic Protestantism which sought to reverse the “old” Calvinistic principles. The revivalists of the second awakening laid the foundation upon which Graham’s revivals were based both in theology and technique (despite Graham’s Baptist (Calvin) roots, his preaching style seems to lean more towards Arminianism).

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<sup>38</sup> Bishop, 39-40.

However, in making theology compatible with the nation's individualism, the leaders of the second awakening unknowingly undermined the importance of the church as a social institution and the sitting pastor as community leader. As a result of this new theological and ecclesiastical emphasis, the pastor became little more than a revivalist himself who's primary (if not sole) duty was to save individual souls by persuading his flock to make a decision to accept Christ on faith. As inheritor of this aspect of revivalism, Graham itinerant nature was born theologically as well as systematically.

If Graham learned anything from his revivalist heritage (either consciously or just by tradition), it was the need for evangelicals to involve themselves in the body politic. In antebellum America, the vigorous Calvinist, or Reformed tradition of political engagement helped promote an assertive evangelical involvement in political life, even among Arminian Methodists. Although Calvinists believed that all Christians had a responsibility to sustain Christian behavior in public life, by using the vote to elect good men and by pressing for moral laws, most evangelicals responded not by withdrawing from politics but by trying to reform politics. As the preeminent revivalist of this period in American Protestantism, Charles Grandison Finney explained, "Politics are a part of religion in such a country as this."<sup>39</sup>

The son of non-religious parents, Finney did not formally consider himself a Christian until he was almost 30 years old. When he did, he was so overcome with guilt

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<sup>39</sup> Charles G. Finney, *Lectures on Revivals and Religion*, ed. William G. McLoughlin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960) 297.

for his sin, he called his fellow choir members together at the church he had begun to attend just the year before and told them that he had had a spiritual awakening and had been spoken to by God. He urged them to accept Christ at once. A revival broke out in the church, then in the church's city of Adams, and then in the entire county. After a long revival career that saw Finney outlive two wives, he took a pastorate at the Second Free Presbyterian Church in New York City in 1832. The church then bought the Chatham Street Theatre, further blurring the lines forwarded by Whitefield between church and theatre. At the first service, a prayer meeting held at 5:30 in the morning, 800 people attended. For seventy nights, Finney preached to crowds ranging from 1500 to 2000.<sup>40</sup> At this theatre-church and others, Finney often used the "anxious bench" in his services, a place near the front where attendees could come to be advised personally when they were concerned about their salvation, a counseling tradition, although not quite in the embarrassing way that Finney used it, that is still being used by revivalists, including Graham. In using the "anxious bench" in respectable urban revivals, congregants were "forced" to make a clear public declaration of intent; and by accepting the revivalist's invitation to walk forward and take their place before the altar after the sermon, the awakened sinner acknowledged their desire to accept the terms of salvation described in Finney's sermon. Since Finney's day, the invitation to come forward (or to "hit the sawdust trail" as Billy Sunday would later call his saw-dust-

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<sup>40</sup> Clyde E. Fant, Jr. and William M. Pinson, Jr., eds. *20 Centuries of Great Preaching, Vol. III* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1971) 322.

strewn wooden makeshift tabernacles) has become the central a part of mass revivalism, urban or rural.

In Finney's use of other performance trends, he must have been affected by those professionally employed in theatre, especially considering his church/theatre was in the same theatrical district and in the path of many 19<sup>th</sup> century stars, such as Edwin Forrest, Junius Brutus Booth, and Charlotte Cushman. These actors infused into their work principles of melodrama, but were also able to make commentary about current concerns (slavery, workers' rights, big city slums), to reflect current conditions, as well as provide reassuring endings so that the audience's faith in America and democracy would not wane. With the rise of burlesque during Finney's heyday, it is no wonder he sought to move into the theatre district to provide alternative fare and then felt compelled to use the same methods of melodrama in his preaching – including the ultra-dramatic use of the “anxious bench.”

Finney is primarily remembered, however, as an ardent revivalist, despite his equally ardent response to the evils of slavery. His labors were principally devoted to mass evangelism and lecturing on revivals. Finney's preparation in oratory and his training in the law combined to make Finney an effective speaker and it is said he spoke in simple language and his illustrations were taken from common experiences.<sup>41</sup> In Finney's “protracted meetings,” as they were sometimes called, Finney urged his congregation to repent immediately, nothing was to be gained by delay, and all might

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<sup>41</sup> Frank G. Beardsley, *A Mighty Winner of Souls* (New York: American Tract Society, 1937) 49.

be lost. His method of calling for public decision offended many; in fact, some would stand up and walk out of his services in protest. This notion of immediate individual public decision and moving forward to the front of the revival tent is also a hallmark of the Graham crusade.<sup>42</sup> Asking for public decision, focusing on political problems, and dramatizing the coming forward of sinners to the anxious seat were all aspects created by Finney that were used by Graham's ministry.

### **Dwight L. Moody and the Social Gospel Movement**

The departure from this individualistic gospel, both theologically and in action, with its emphasis on crisis conversion, constituted the third basic shift in American Protestant thought. This departure took place between 1875 and 1915 and produced what may be called America's third great Awakening, though it is usually referred to as the "Social Gospel Movement." As its name implies, the Social Gospel's theological emphasis was upon the social teachings of Jesus rather than upon personal salvation. The Social Gospel preachers, among whom Washington Gladden and Walter Rauschenbusch were the most prominent, were not revivalists in the usual sense of the term. They believed that it was less important to convert individual souls by means of revival services than it was to promote the Kingdom of God "on earth as it is in heaven" by social, economic, and political reforms. The Social Gospelers were also influenced by

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<sup>42</sup> For additional insight into Finney, see William G. McLoughlin's *Modern Revivalism: Charles Grandison Finney to Billy Graham* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2005) and Keith J. Hardaman's *Charles Grandison Finney 1792-1875: Revivalist and Reformer* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 1990).

new trends in Biblical scholarship and in science and came to place emphasis on the letter of Christianity than upon its spirit.<sup>43</sup>

The essence of the Social Gospel Movement lay in its attempt to interpret Protestantism in terms that were more meaningful to the progressive and pragmatic temper of the time. This new shift in theological emphasis, like those in the past, met with serious resistance among church leaders, some of whom disliked the social reform aspect and some of whom disliked its abandonment of the literal interpretation of the Bible. The result of the latter quarrel was the famous fundamentalist-modernist schism which reached its climax in the Scopes trial in 1925. In relation to this, early in his ministry, Graham began to doubt the veracity of the Bible (or literal interpretation favored by the previous shift in theology sparked by the second great awakening). For six months Graham pondered whether the Bible could be trusted completely. John Pollock explained in his biography of Graham: "After [preaching at] Altoona, Billy felt that he must decide once and for all either to spend his life studying whether or not God had spoken, or to spend it as God's ambassador, bringing a message which he might not fully comprehend in all details until after death."<sup>44</sup> According to Graham, one day he dropped to his knees and prayed, "O God, there are many things in this book I do not understand. But, God, I am going to accept this book as your word *by faith*. I'm going to allow my faith to go beyond my intellect and believe that this is thy

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<sup>43</sup> See Anna M. Singer, *Walter Rauschenbusch and His Contribution to Social Christianity* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2007).

<sup>44</sup> John Pollock, *To All the Nations: The Billy Graham Story* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1985) 40.

inspired word.”<sup>45</sup> Graham now describes the Bible as a book of faith, rather than a book of science.

By his own admission, Graham tends to share the opinions of those who were the opponents of the Social Gospel movement and has found more common ground with fundamentalists than with the modernists, although Graham refuses to be labeled a Fundamentalist, saying that “Fundamentalist is a grand and wonderful word, but it got off track and into so many extreme positions [...] I felt like my own brother had turned against me,”<sup>46</sup> but Graham was still heavily impacted by the social gospel, vowing that there needed to be legs on anyone’s personal relationship with Christ. However, since one consequence of the Social Gospel Movement was a thirty-year decline in the popularity of mass revival campaigns, Graham was understandably pessimistic about the value of that “awakening.” To Graham, the heroes of the era were not the Social Gospellers, but men like Dwight L. Moody and Billy Sunday. These professional evangelists who, in their revival campaigns, led the unsuccessful fight to save the individualistic evangelicalism embodied in the famous “five points of fundamentalism”<sup>47</sup> from what they, and Graham, for that matter, consider the rationalistic and socialistic theology of Gladden and Rauschenbusch.

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<sup>45</sup> Billy Graham, “Billy Graham’s Own Story, God is My Witness, Part II,” *McCall’s* (May 1964) 179.

<sup>46</sup> Nancy Gibbs and Richard N. Ostling, “God’s Billy Pulpit,” *Time* (15 November 1993) 72.

<sup>47</sup> David O. Beale, *In Pursuit of Purity: American Fundamentalism Since 1850* (Greenville, S.C.: Unusual Publications, 1986) 350-353. The “five points of fundamentalism” are 1) the literal infallibility of Scriptures, 2) the virgin birth, 3) the substitutionary atonement, 4) the bodily resurrection, and 5) the imminent, bodily second coming of Christ.



## Finney and Moody Connections

According to William McLoughlin, Finney and Moody did the most to introduce evangelicalism to modern revivalism.<sup>48</sup> Revivals, at least as they were put into nomenclature by Finney and Moody, were mostly matters of individual congregations to undertake with a view to reaching neighbors, people they knew or at least lived near by. While Methodists and Baptists were more geared toward revivals, they very rarely sprang up voluntarily. This was so congregants could take advantage of the seasons of the year, the climate, and the rhythms of agriculture. By the 1840s, camp meetings, which once had been prominent, were all but extinct.<sup>49</sup> The revivals that replaced the camp meetings were a function of the people in settled clusters. In connection with these changes, what energized Moody was his urgency to reach newly moved and newly arrived people and to address conditions of personal and the social uprooting that was so abundant in the late nineteenth century epitomized in the aftermath of war and Reconstruction and the displaced people congregating in bursting cities.<sup>50</sup>

In addition to reaching ousted people, Moody was also very effective in starting seminaries and bible institutes (the present Moody Bible Institute started as the Chicago Evangelization Society) as well as summer conferences and exhibits, an attribute that

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<sup>48</sup> William G. McLoughlin, *Modern Revivalism* (New York: Ronald Press, 1959) 3-64 and 523-30.

<sup>49</sup> Dickson D. Bruse, Jr., *And They All Sang Hallelujah* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1972) 56.

<sup>50</sup> Samuel S. Hill, "Northern and Southern Varieties of American Evangelicalism in the Nineteenth Century," *Evangelicalism: Comparative Studies of Popular Protestantism in North America, The British Isles, and Beyond 1700-1990*, eds. Mark A. Noll, David W. Bebbington, and George A. Rawlyk (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) 285.

Graham, who was well aware of his revivalist history,<sup>51</sup> continued to capitalize upon. Graham was especially infatuated with Moody, referring to him and his ministry as well as Graham's personal study of the nineteenth century preacher many times in his 1997 autobiography. Moody's impact on Graham can be seen in many ways. For instance, at the World's Fair of New York in 1964-65, Graham was hesitant to display a BGEA exhibit until he learned that Moody's greatest evangelical impact may have been through the extensive campaign he ran in connection with the 1893 Chicago World's Fair.<sup>52</sup> Graham's self-aware kinship with Moody even extended to Graham feeling called to purchase a struggling British magazine, *The Christian*, which was "started in the previous century and covered extensively Dwight L. Moody's ministry in Britain."<sup>53</sup> Graham's hope was to turn the magazine into the British version of *Christianity Today*, the magazine the BGEA started in 1956.

In 1875, when Moody was adapting Finney's simple techniques to the more complicated process of large-scale evangelistic crusades in the teeming metropolitan centers of the post-Civil War era, he was welcomed in similar fashion by the educated elite as Graham was initially welcomed in the 1950s primarily because of the changes that were made between Finney and Moody, with whom the educated elite, particularly

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<sup>51</sup> Graham even used some of Moody's sermon concepts when he preached early in his career, something that Graham fully owns up to. "In full swing, physically and vocally, I was telling my audience about the ancient world's wait for Christ, as the great Dwight L. Moody had presented it in a sermon" (Graham, *Just as I am*, 50).

<sup>52</sup> Graham, *Just as I am*, 435.

<sup>53</sup> Graham, *Just as I am*, 293.

the Princeton Theological Society's bent on Calvinism, differed.<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, Moody substituted the inquiry room for the anxious bench, providing sanctuary from embarrassment of being prayed for in public. Graham follows Moody's refinement of the anxious seat, but still gives an "altar call" prior to sending the "anxious" to his counselors.

Among other measures advocated by Finney, especially in his *Lectures on Revivals*, published in 1868 by Oberlin College and followed by mass evangelists ever since he advocated for them, were the necessity for concerted prayer efforts by large groups of Christians, the use of vigorous advertising methods, the adoption of a dramatic preaching style, and the employment of "protracted meetings" of continuous revival effort stretching over much longer periods than the four-day meetings which previously constituted the accepted duration of frontier camp meetings.<sup>55</sup> But compared to the elaborate procedures developed by Moody, Finney's revival techniques seem somewhat crude and feeble.

### **Moody and Graham Connections**

It was Moody who actually worked out the organization methods Graham and his team used in the 1950s. Additionally, Moody was the first revivalist to advertise his campaigns in newspapers, on billboards, posters, handbills, and placards; he was the

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<sup>54</sup> David B. Calhoun, *Princeton Seminary, Vol. 2: The Majestic Testimony, 1869-1929* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1996), 113-114. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries, the seminary was made famous for its defense of Calvinistic Presbyterianism.

<sup>55</sup> See John Walsh, "'Methodism' and the Origins of English-Speaking Evangelicalism," *Evangelicalism: Comparative Studies of Popular Protestantism in North America, The British Isles, and Beyond 1700-1990* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) 13-30.

first to make detailed advance preparations for publicity, church organization, training of ushers, choir, counselors, and prayer meeting leaders; he was the first to publish audited accounts of the expenses, collections, and donations for this multi-thousand dollar crusades which lasted anywhere from six weeks to six months. Like later evangelists, Moody went out of his way to cooperate with local journalists in order to provide the fullest possible coverage for his meetings. Moody was also the first itinerant revivalist to employ a solo singer and choir leader to assist him, and many people said that it was the gospel hymns of Ira Sankey rather than the preaching of Moody that attracted crowds (the same label has been placed on Cliff Barrows and Bev Shea of Graham's preaching). If Finney made revivalism a profession, Moody made it a big business. Like Graham, the leading captains of industry and finance, men like J. P. Morgan, Jay Cooke, and Cyrus McCormick, served on Moody's committees and donated their time and money for the sake of bringing religion to the urban masses. It is not surprising that Graham preferred to associate himself with Moody rather than the more sensational and theatrical Billy Sunday.

Moody proved to be more of a performance influence of Graham, as well, helping shape Graham's approach to dealings with money as well as proving an example to Graham of how the evangelical's pulpit could reach presidents.<sup>56</sup> Like Graham, huge sums of money came to Moody from all over the world, and most of this money Moody devoted to ministerial efforts. Though Moody could have become

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<sup>56</sup> For more insight into D.L. Moody, see Bruce J. Evensen's *God's Man for the Gilded Age: D.L. Moody and the Rise of Modern Mass Evangelism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

wealthy from royalties, gifts, and honorariums, he refused, instead setting up a trust into which the money was placed, giving himself a modest salary for most of his career. Also like Graham's, Moody's greatness was recognized by many American presidents. Woodrow Wilson said of Moody shortly after his death in 1899, "My admiration and esteem for Mr. Moody were very deep indeed." President McKinley once said to Moody's son, W.R. Moody, "Do you realize that your father was a very great man?"<sup>57</sup> Graham has had equal honor among modern Presidents.

As to performance style, it is said that Moody always spoke as if his heart were breaking, and he preached in a way as to not purposefully strike fear in his patrons. In his sermon, "Hell," Moody said, "A great many people say I don't preach up the terrors of religion. I don't want to - don't want to scare men into the kingdom of God. I don't believe in preaching that way [...] Terror never brought a man in yet."<sup>58</sup> Graham has had similar accusations leveled his way and similar to Graham, Moody was criticized for his nonsectarian, nondoctrinal sermons and for the fact that his evangelistic ministry was heard with appreciation by many different denominations. For the most part, Moody and Graham preached messages not directed toward Christian growth, instead choosing to preach simple evangelistic messages for common people. Graham is quoted many times as appealing to his listeners to get involved in their home church for true spiritual development; his crusades were only a first step on the path to righteousness.

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<sup>57</sup> Arthur Percy Fitt, *Moody Still Lives* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1936) 144 and 149.

<sup>58</sup> Clyde E. Fant, Jr. and William M. Pinson, Jr., eds., *20 Centuries of Great Preaching, Vol. VI* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1971) 288.

Charles Erdman, credited with writing the first full-length biography of Moody, comments on a general performance description of Moody taken from seeing the evangelist many times,

Imagine Moody in the pulpit: he is short and square, with a full beard and a heavy, Victorian look about him. He looks out on a packed hall – three thousand, sometimes five thousand or more, jammed in to hear him, people standing about the walls. Sankey has sung; the choir has finished; the hymns are over. Moody begins to preach: he speaks with such rapid delivery that “Jerusalem” is pronounced in two syllables. His gestures are few but there is a tremendous energy about him. His language is poor, his diction and grammar are worse. But his sentences are short and direct, filled with colorful expressions and slang. Sometimes he says “ain’t” deliberately, sometimes accidentally. His delivery is sincere and natural. Emotion fills every sentence; there is an urgency about him.<sup>59</sup>

In his acting treatise, *An Actor Prepares*, Stanislavsky, in the guise of acting teacher Tortsov, implores his students to find the inner motive for finding the will of their characters. Tortsov finally convinces his students that feelings are fleeting, imagination requires guidance, and attention (probably better translated as “concentration”) must function in an auxiliary role. It is sheer will of the mind that moves audiences to believe actors and the characters they have created. It is the

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<sup>59</sup> Charles R. Erdman, *D.L. Moody* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1928) 67.

urgency of the actor that makes the objective of the character come alive. It could be argued that in a like manner, Moody's urgency and desire to move his audience without using the "fear" tactic allowed his ministry to thrive. Tortsov says,

The power of these motive forces [mind, will, and feeling] is enhanced by their interaction. They support and incite one another with the result that they always act at the same time and in close relationship. When we call our mind into action by the same token we stir our will and feelings. It is only when these forces are co-operating harmoniously that we can create freely.<sup>60</sup>

Moody unknowingly used these acting tenets to such a degree that truth and honesty (Stanislavsky's main theatrical goal) were apparently at his side, an attribute that many scholars note time and again. "Faith and a Sense of Truth," Tortsov's placard and Moody's "call" are inexplicably intertwined.

### **Billy Sunday's Shock Effect**

These two luminaries, Finney and Moody, were trailed in celebrity by Billy Sunday and Sam P. Jones, of whom, Sunday is the most compelling to compare with Graham's brand of new revivalism, mainly because of their shared name, the sheer numbers to which they preached, and the way in which they were both supported and lauded. In fact, when Sunday preached in New York, the crowds were so great at Carnegie Hall, that even Andrew Carnegie could not get in. When he preached in the

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<sup>60</sup> Constantin Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares*, Trans. Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1936) 233.

Midwest, communities frequently declared a holiday and held street parades while the whole community turned out to hear Sunday. In 1918, the president of the Cadillac Motor Company called Sunday, "this great plumed knight clothed in the armor of God," and John D. Rockefeller said, "Mr. Sunday is a rallying center around whom all people interested in good things may gather."<sup>61</sup>

Born to a Union soldier who died in battle, Sunday never had the opportunity to know his father, an attribute that played itself out many times in Sunday's preaching career. Indeed, Sunday and his brother spent much of their childhood in orphanages in the Midwest, which, it has been speculated, made Sunday aware of the need to get out of his predicaments through performance of some kind, be it playing baseball, which he showed exceptional skill at doing, or preaching to the masses. Sunday, in fact, seemed destined to life in professional baseball because it suited his energetic and Ty Cobb-like nature. His mother said of him, "He always had an extra supply of energy" and he "liked to play games where he could show his strength for he was a strong lad."<sup>62</sup> Sunday played professional baseball with Chicago, Pittsburgh, and Philadelphia, but he found another calling, however, under the preaching of Harry Monroe of the Pacific Garden Mission. Under Monroe's tutelage, Sunday became a Christian in 1886, altering his life. He gave up drinking, swearing, gambling, and going to the theatre, and he refused to play baseball on Sundays. He began to deliver sermons as a lay preacher and

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<sup>61</sup> William G. McLoughlin, *Modern Revivalism* (New York: Ronald Press, 1959) 402.

<sup>62</sup> McLoughlin, 403.



ultimately resigned his \$5,000 a year salary as a baseball player and took a job for \$83.33 a month with the YMCA, vowing to help orphaned children.<sup>63</sup>

After some time and some success, and with little training, Sunday hit the sawdust trail, so named because in their heyday, Sunday's campaigns were held in temporary wooden structures with sawdust covering the floor. Those who responded to Sunday's appeal had to walk up the sawdust covered aisles to shake the evangelist's hand.<sup>64</sup> But, in Sunday's early days of itinerant preaching, Sunday's preaching style was much different, beginning in a subdued manner and giving local ministers a primary role in planning and conducting services, coming onto the platform as more of a "guest speaker." Sunday's ostentatious and dictatorial platform approach came later, after he decided that he could win greater success with a shocking style, more attuned to his sandpaper-like countenance and reputation as an athlete.

As he turned toward the flamboyant manner, Sunday began to draw immense crowds in one revival campaign after another throughout the United States. With great success (barely two years after he began itinerancy), Sunday met some opposition for his showy preaching style. The evangelist soon built a professional staff and developed smoother techniques with the additional help of well-known businessmen such as John Wannamaker, John D. Rockefeller, J. Ogen Armour, and Louis Swift. In his well-organized campaign machine, volunteers from churches staffed all the necessary

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<sup>63</sup> Fant and Pinson, *20 Centuries of Great Preaching*, Vol. VII, 218.

<sup>64</sup> Billy Graham Center Archives, "Hitting the Sawdust Trail with Billy Sunday," placard, Wheaton College, Wheaton IL.

chores,<sup>65</sup> an attribute Graham (and other evangelists for that matter) would later use as well.

His showy performance style was one of Sunday's keys for success. He incorporated acrobatics into preaching and was flashy in his publicity. To build excitement and drama, Sunday withheld the call for public decisions for Christ during the first days of a revival so that when he did make an altar call, hundreds, waiting for their moment, would rush the stage. On those days, the Sunday machine would invite newspapers to the meeting so that records of the results could be heightened.

Theologically, Sunday aligned himself with conservatives and preached on the five points of fundamentalism, while scolding or mocking modernist liberals. He was also recognized for his determined contribution to passing the Prohibition Amendment and promoting the sale of war bonds during World War I. Sunday's moral interests were not confined to alcohol or patriotism, he had much to say concerning other "moral" issues as well, such as dancing, card playing, gambling, commercial dishonesty, and of course, patronizing the theatre.<sup>66</sup>

Just as when he was a child, Sunday was intent on showing his strength and always seemed to be in a fight. He attacked the lethargy of the church without concern for specific clergy. In fact, his tirades became his hallmark. Despite this obvious difference with Moody's niceties, clergy and audiences flocked to Sunday's revivals

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<sup>65</sup> William G. McLoughlin, Jr., *Billy Sunday Was His Real Name* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955) 154-55.

<sup>66</sup> Roger Bruns, *Preacher: Billy Sunday and Big-Time American Evangelism* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2002) 16-17.

which led Sunday to claim that he could breathe new life into dying churches. Sunday was also known for his rude tactics, insulting residentially devoted Christian preachers who appeared on the platform beside him. John Henry Jowett, the famous preacher, wrote a friend in England to describe his experience,

As I have just been to hear Billy Sunday, the cultured evangelist; and as he addressed me as a "white-livered, black-hearted mug," I think I'll pass the compliment on to you. His tabernacle holds 20,000, and the ministers are penned in an enclosure immediately on Billy's right, and he knows just where we are, he fires his torpedoes at us before we even show a periscope. He lets go a fiery shot at us then retires across his huge platform making silent nods at us.

At one moment, observing that one or two of us looked slightly resentful, he raced towards us shouting, "I don't care whether your collars are buttoned at the front or the back." That was too much for me, and if I hadn't a collar round me, in the shape of a Jaegar belt, one of Billy's audience would have gone all to pieces, and would have been seen no more.<sup>67</sup>

It is an open debate as to Sunday's evangelical success, but theologically, he was widely regarded as hopeless and his platform antics, ridiculous. Sunday's unorthodox pulpit techniques are legendary, once saying "I'd stand on my head in a mud puddle if

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<sup>67</sup> Arthur Porritt, *John Henry Jowett* (New York: George H. Doran Co., 1925) 246-47.

I thought it would help me win souls to Christ.” It is not recorded that he ever did so, but his authorized biographer, Lee Thomas, records that H.L. Mencken referred to him as a “gymnast for Jesus” and called him “the calliope of Zion.”<sup>68</sup> Some insist that his success was due to the times he lived, “a rowdy, emotional, activist age, a time when many middle-class Americans were frustrated by the increasing complexities of theology and society were looking for simple answers,”<sup>69</sup> but any revivalist’s success is contingent on the time they are in the social eye. Sunday was also charged with commercialism and that his revivals were dependent on sensational advertising, boasting of results, and his P. T. Barnum-ish showmanship. Some of his detractors must have been emboldened by Sunday’s lobbying against alcohol, many of whom blamed Sunday for the establishment of the 18<sup>th</sup> amendment. Arthur Hoyt’s attacks were more toward Sunday’s emphasis on personal salvation and individualism, saying, “It lacks also the social conception of religion. It is superficial in the estimate of Christian character and the mission of the Christian Life.”<sup>70</sup> In light of all Sunday’s expertise and foibles, perhaps the November 6, 1935, *New York Times* obituary was correct in stating that Sunday was “the greatest high pressure and mass conversion Christian evangel that America or the world has known.”<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Lee Thomas, *The Billy Sunday Story: An Authorized Biography* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1961), 55.

<sup>69</sup> Roger Bruns, *Preacher: Billy Sunday and Big-Time American Evangelism* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2002) 16-17.

<sup>70</sup> Arthur S. Hoyt, *The Pulpit and American Life* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1921) 167.

<sup>71</sup> “Obituary: Billy Sunday,” *New York Times* (November 6, 1935) B 2.2.

Billy Sunday became a living caricature of the evangelist type that would be ridiculed by Sinclair Lewis and countless other novelists, movies, and plays. His bombastic, machine-gun style of delivery, his acrobatic gyrations, including sliding into the pulpit like a baseball player sliding into second base, and his anti-intellectualism, grounded in homespun sayings, such as, “going to church doesn’t make you a Christian any more than going to a garage makes you an automobile.”<sup>72</sup> A 1917 Atlanta newspaper describes how Sunday preached to 30,000 on the first day of a week long revival, “At a climactic point in a sermon, Sunday would grab a chair, leap up and then, with one foot on the chair and the other on the pulpit, implore sinners to repent and God to forgive.” In the same article, historian Franklin Garrett said of Sunday’s campaign, “It was one of Atlanta’s great emotional experiences.”<sup>73</sup> Sunday’s intent was to shock people out of their daily rituals to experience the cold water a relationship with Christ could deliver. One of Sunday’s most famous statements, from his sermon, “The Devil’s Boomerangs”<sup>74</sup>, Sunday spews, “I wouldn’t wipe my feet, I wouldn’t spit or blow my nose on a society that makes a distinction between the man who sidesteps and the woman who goes wrong.”<sup>75</sup> Sunday apparently cared little what anyone thought about his language. In his talks to men, he said, “I know this is plain talking, but what

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<sup>72</sup> Janet Lowe, *Billy Graham Speaks* (Thorndike, ME: G.K. Hall, 2000) 18.

<sup>73</sup> Margaret Shannon, “Where Billy Graham’s Sawdust Trail Begins,” *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution Magazine* (January 15, 1970) 8.

<sup>74</sup> The sermon “The Devil’s Boomerangs” relates much of Sunday’s baseball background and shows his opposition to whiskey and his ability to speak “plain talk.” Found in Fant and Pinson, *20 Centuries of Great Preaching*, Vol. VII, 253-60.

<sup>75</sup> Fant and Pinson, *20 Centuries of Great Preaching*, Vol. VII, 255.

is needed in this country are men not afraid to talk plainly to men. There are men hobbling diseased around Omaha who say, 'Oh, I don't go to hear Billy. He is too vulgar for me.' Rot. Plain speaking is always vulgar to the rascal and old fool who are afraid to hear the truth." Some of Sunday's other expressions were crude, but funny, "There are many young men so vile that the only good use that could be made of them is to dip their heads in buckets of soapsuds and use them for mops."<sup>76</sup> In regard to his choice of words, Sunday said of himself, "I want to reach the people, so I use the people's language."<sup>77</sup> In fact, Sunday reached people that others had written off, and was endorsed by many who would not want to preach to these undesirables.

When Billy Graham was a child, his parents took him to Charlotte to hear America's most famous and flashy evangelist, Billy Sunday. Graham writes,

I was about four years old and too young to understand that my namesake had preached to the largest crowds in the history of his time. I did know that he was a former baseball player and sometimes started his service by running across the platform and sliding up to the pulpit on his stomach, as you'd steal home base in a ball game. I was held silent by the promise that if I squirmed, Billy Sunday would personally run me out of his tabernacle. No threat was necessary, however. The tension in the

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<sup>76</sup> Fant and Pinson, *20 Centuries of Great Preaching*, Vol. VII, 223.

<sup>77</sup> McLoughlin, *Billy Sunday Was His Real Name*, 164.

huge throng and the dynamic gestures of the athletic evangelist held me spellbound for the entire two hour service.<sup>78</sup>

By the time Graham witnessed Sunday, however, long years of overuse caused Sunday's voice to become harsh and rasping. He usually shouted, but his clipped and rapid phrases were nonetheless perfectly distinct. Stenographers who tried to write down Sunday's sermons found that he often spoke at a rate of three hundred words per minute – which is more than twice the average. Despite the speed, his articulation was so distinct that words were clearly heard most of the time, only lost due to the constant interruptions of laughter from his anti-intellectualisms (like, "They tell me a revival is only temporary, so is a bath, but it does you good."<sup>79</sup>) and applause for his harsh views on drinking and the "sexualization of America." Sometimes when interrupted, he would wait for the handclapping to cease and sometimes repeat "a sentence that the people may be certain they got it all."<sup>80</sup> Furthermore, there was a rising and falling cadence to Sunday's voice, a cadence often described as "hypnotic," designed to build audiences toward an emotional response even though Sunday himself denounced "emotionalism" in his revivals.

Despite his overblown nature, he did have a unique understanding and sympathized with those who were on their downward spirals, having lived on that

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<sup>78</sup> Billy Graham, "Billy Graham's Own Story, God is My Witness, Part I," *McCall's* (April 1964) 125.

<sup>79</sup> Arthur S. Hoyt, *The Pulpit and American Life* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1921) 168.

<sup>80</sup> McLoughlin, *Billy Sunday Was His Real Name*, 158.

same corner himself. One newspaper described him early on as “Young, talented, well-educated, eloquent, humorous, with powers of ridicule and denunciation developed to perfection with a fearlessness and bravery seldom equaled” with “a delivery that is most surprising and almost bewildering in its rapidity, with its boundless energy and enthusiasm [...] He is an up-to-date man, he is no old rut.”<sup>81</sup>

Despite his obvious differences theologically and performatively, Sunday fought hard to claim kinship with earlier evangelists in the Graham line, such as Whitefield, Moody, and Finney, and it is unfortunate that Sunday’s excessive tactics might have been conflated with these earlier evangelists, but it is clear that, although respectful of Sunday’s reach, Graham held a more personal affinity with D.L. Moody’s style of preaching. Nonetheless, it is also clear that Sunday had a great impact on Graham, especially as a young boy.<sup>82</sup>

Though Sunday was seemingly as sincere and honest as Whitefield, Finney, and Moody, he gave traditional revivalism a black eye because of his use of vulgarities, slang, inappropriate humor, and acrobatics in the pulpit and because he was known to have received over one million dollars in freewill offerings<sup>83</sup> (Graham used the term “love offerings”) from his admirers in the opening decade of the twentieth century. Overall, Graham avoided these pitfalls, yet his debt to Sunday is deeper than even he

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<sup>81</sup> *Audobon Republican* (Iowa), January 30, 1902, cited in McLoughlin, *Billy Sunday Was His Real Name*, 406.

<sup>82</sup> For more insight into Sunday, see D. Bruce Lockerbie, *Billy Sunday* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1965), and Homer Alvan Rodeheaver, *Twenty Years with Billy Sunday* (Nashville: Cokesbury Press, 1936).

<sup>83</sup> Lyle W. Dorsett, *Billy Sunday and the Redemption of America* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2004), 114.



has admitted. Sunday perfected Moody's system of urban mass evangelism to an even more highly organized form of corporate enterprise. To Sunday, for example, Graham owes the idea of a team of associate experts to manage the details of every phase of a campaign; Graham owes the practice of reserving large blocks of seats at every meeting for delegations whose attendance had been arranged in advance; and Graham owes the use of massive local choirs and elaborate entertainment features as parts of his revivals. There is more than a little of Sunday's tendency to inject social and political comment into his sermons in order to produce attention-catching headlines in the next morning's newspapers. And like Sunday, Graham equates conservative evangelical Christianity with patriotic Americanism, especially in Graham's anti-communist days. However, with this said, Graham's revival system actually is indebted to no one – it is the ultimate product of a long tradition.

### **Billy Graham: Usher of the Fourth Great Awakening**

After Sunday, the fourth great awakening in America, which began after World War II, was marked by a shift away from the social gospel philosophy and the modernist (or liberal Protestant) theology. It is also closely related to the shift away from the economic and political liberalism of the first half of the century. Both the social theology of modernism and the political liberalism of progressivism and the New Deal maintained that to save the individual it was first necessary to save or at least, reform society.<sup>84</sup> This awakening is dominated by such terms as neo-conservatism,

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<sup>84</sup> See Ian S. Rennie, "Fundamentalism and the Varieties of North Atlantic Evangelicalism," *Evangelicalism*, eds. Mark A. Noll, David W. Bebbington and George A. Rawlyk (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) 333-350.

neo-orthodoxy, and neo-evangelism because in many ways it represents a return to the older philosophical and theological emphasis upon the individual as the focus of thought and action<sup>85</sup> (as neoclassicism is also a return to the older philosophical ways). There was little attempt to return to the Calvinistic dogma of predestination and its corollaries, but there was the tendency to emphasize the limitations of the optimistic faith in self-reliance and free will which originally began the breakdown of Calvinism and reached culmination in the 1930s. Religious historians, such as William McLoughlin and Willard Sperry note this is very important to the development of the fourth awakening. The three previous shifts in American theological and social thought were not pendulum swings cancelling each other out; they have in fact been adaptations of “traditional” religious value-seeking individuals to what they perceived to be an increasingly secular, self-centered view of other religious leaders. The hope of various revival leaders was to stem this secularist tide, but their methods of doing so have amounted, in fact, to a series of capitulations to it. In each awakening prior to 1945, Protestantism has taken further steps from the God-centered universe of the Middle Ages and the Reformation.

While it is fair to say that throughout American history, revivalism has been a means of reconciling the Christian tradition to changing times coupled with impacting the times and being impacted by them, it is essential to recognize that the revivalism of Billy Graham, despite his use and building on previous revivalist traditions, is very

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<sup>85</sup> The Fifth Great Awakening, probably began around 1975, is linked to the transition from Neo-Orthodoxy to the so-called Information Revolution that marks our culture today. Graham could be considered an usher of this revolution.

different from the revivalism of Whitefield, Finney, Moody, or Sunday. These four characters were part of an American tradition of traveling religious orators, who with passion and idealism influenced America since its earliest colonial days. This was the heritage that Billy Graham would become part of, but would simultaneously distance himself from. Whitefield connected mind and body into an triggered emotionalism; Finney purposefully used theatricalism, even “performing” in a reclaimed theatre; Moody chose the method of physicalizing and intellectualizing his process; Sunday mirrored aspects of Brecht’s theories such as distancing and overt emotionalism; Graham incorporated much of his predecessor’s “acting” methods, which created a unique and singular performance paradigm built on a guarded theatricality, simple messages, and intense organization while not losing much of the emotionalism paramount in making such grandiose changes in people’s lives.

Immediately prior to Graham’s grand entrance after the end of World War II, there was little expectation for a revival of religion. None had followed World War I and when the great depression of the 1930s failed to produce one, many sociologists and historians agreed that the old revival tradition in America were dying or, in fact, already dead.<sup>86</sup> Even church leaders and theologians had written off revivals as a primitive and outmoded form of religious expression no longer suited to the advanced stage of Western Civilization. In 1946 the Rev. Willard L. Sperry, Dean of the Harvard Divinity School, stated in a book designed to explain religion in the United States to the

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<sup>86</sup> John Mark Terry, *Evangelism: A Concise History* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1994) 165.

British public, “We are tired of religious revivals as we have known them in the last half century [...] Among all but the most backward churches it is now agreed that education ought to be, and probably is, the best way of interesting our people in religion and of identifying them with one or another of our many denominations.”<sup>87</sup> Revivalism was left as an old, dead form – the Latin of revival language.

In agreement, the dean of a small Bible College in New York noted some time later that during the early 1940s “even the most ardent evangelical was convinced that mass evangelism was outmoded.”<sup>88</sup> Yet within a few months after the war had ended, and before Sperry’s remarks on “the passing of the religious revival from the American scene”<sup>89</sup> were published, the newest in America’s long history of “great awakenings” was already underway. In October, 1945, a periodical which spoke for the resurgent fundamentalist wing of Protestantism reported, “For the first time since the days of Chapman and Alexander, Billy Sunday, and other great evangelists of the early twentieth century, we are faced with the challenging situation of having more calls for evangelistic campaigns than there are competent evangelists to go around.”<sup>90</sup> Few knew that Billy Graham was already preparing his performance techniques for the preaching platform. Four years later, the handsome Wheaton College graduate strode onto a rough-hewn wooden platform under a huge tent pitched on the outskirts of Los

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<sup>87</sup> William L. Sperry, *Religion in America* (New York, 1946) 161-162.

<sup>88</sup> Robert O. Ferm, *Cooperative Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958). 12.

<sup>89</sup> Sperry, 162.

<sup>90</sup> *United Evangelical Action*, Cincinnati, OH (October 15, 1945) 12.

Angeles. Five thousand hushed spectators leaned forward, watching intently as he began to speak from the end of a large microphone while slide images of both Jesus Christ and exhortation scriptural passages passed behind him (enough to make any user of Power Point jealous). In his left hand he clutched his black Bible (the same bible he would use fifty years later in San Juan) while his right hand jabbed a rigid index finger at heaven. His wavy blond hair tossed loosely over his fervent blue eyes as he shouted into the microphone (written down and published a year later),<sup>91</sup>

We need a revival. I think we are living at a time in world history when God is going to give us a desperate choice, a choice of either revival or judgment [...] God can still use America to evangelize the world. In this moment I can see the judgment hand of God about to fall [...] This may be God's last great call. We need a revival [...] I believe we can have revival any time we meet God's conditions. I believe that God is true to His Word and that He must rain righteousness upon us if we meet his conditions.<sup>92</sup>

Much like his evangelistic forbearers, Graham was out to scare the devil from his hearers with a firm jaw that snapped shut in teeth-grinding seriousness after a biting remark. Graham's face was often stern, almost angry. There were no gestures of equivocation, no apologetic mannerisms (he often refused to apologize saying that it was not his words, but the bibles). Graham's head did not tilt in a pleading gesture;

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<sup>91</sup> *Billy Graham 1949 LA Crusade Newsreel*, provided by the Billy Graham Research Center, Wheaton College, Wheaton, Illinois.

<sup>92</sup> William F. Graham, "We Need Revival!" *Revival in Our Time* (Wheaton: College Press, 1950) 69-77.

there was no squinting, no shoulder-shrugging, no sweet talk. His urgings were more commands than pleadings, and his forceful gestures were an effective accompaniment. His index finger would chop the air, jab at his audience with fists thrust forward, but he would stay away from doing too much over-acting. His voice was clear, (Graham said that divine intervention often allowed his cracking voice to ring true)<sup>93</sup> and by the time Graham concluded his eight-week tent meeting in Los Angeles the readers of *Life*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Quick*, the Hearst papers, and the newspapers carrying the Associated Press dispatches across the country knew that America's fourth great awakening had begun. Billy Graham's name was added to the list of revivalists who took performance as a primary aspect of their preaching beginning with George Whitefield in the 1740s and continuing to Charles Grandison Finney and Dwight L. Moody in the nineteenth century, even down to Billy Sunday in the twentieth.

In 1949 Graham spoke principally to and for the "fundamentalists"<sup>94</sup> of America, but within five years his revival crusades were backed by the churchgoers and church leaders of virtually all the nation's Protestant churches, and some from the higher churches (Catholic, Episcopalian, Anglican, etc.). By 1954 the editor of *Time* was convinced that Billy Graham was not only the "successor to Billy Sunday" but that his position in contemporary Christendom rivaled that of Pope Pius XII: "Billy Graham is

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<sup>93</sup> Bishop, 37.

<sup>94</sup> As a movement, "fundamentalism," should not be confused with the revivalism trend that started in the eighteenth century. Fundamentalism arose in the United States starting among conservative Presbyterian academics and theologians at Princeton Theological Seminary in the first decade of the Twentieth Century. See Karen Armstrong, *The Battle for God: A History of Fundamentalism* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2001).

the best-known, the most talked about Christian leader in the world today, barring the Pope.”<sup>95</sup> By 1958 Graham had enjoyed the hospitality and the admiration not only of the President and Vice-President of the United States, but of the Queen and Prime Minister of England, the Prime Minister of India, and of numerous other heads of state and influential political, business, social, and religious leaders around the globe. The Gallup Poll’s annual survey for the world’s “most admired,” disclosed in 1958 that Americans rated only President Eisenhower, Winston Churchill, and Albert Schweitzer ahead of Billy Graham.<sup>96</sup>

For all the publicity Graham received and all the honors showered upon him in his rapid rise to fame, few Americans (and even fewer abroad) understood the purpose and significance of his revivals and the consequences of Graham’s use of media (both in the constructs of using microphones, film, television, radio, and print as well as using journalism and journalists for institutional gain). Today, his name is a household word, but his career, his methods, and the historical reasons for his phenomenal evangelistic success were and still are, an enigma. For many devout Christians, he was, humanly speaking, inexplicable – a man sent by God whose work was supernaturally ordained and sustained. Graham’s ability to push the idea that he and his ministry were designed by God was built on a history of revivalists using these actions, but Graham also, like any innovator, built his ministry on revivalist past to both predict and shape the future. To skeptical observers he was labeled as another hell-fire and damnation

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<sup>95</sup> *Time* (October 25, 1954) 54.

<sup>96</sup> *Time*, October 25, 1954, p. 55.

exhorter lumped indiscriminately with Billy Sunday, Aimee Semple McPherson, Father Divine, and Oral Roberts. Many who never witnessed his reputable, well-ordered meetings imagined them to be emotional orgies of hallelujah-shouting, hand-clapping, and hysteria. Others considered Graham an egoist out to win fame, fortune, and/or power by playing upon the credulity of the unsophisticated. Others spoke of Graham as a skilled manipulator of crowd psychology and the mass media often inferring that he wanted to create a new denomination of "Grahamites," to capitalize on contemporary social maladjustments by denouncing the shortcomings of "regular" churches, and to rally the simple-minded around him by prophesying the imminent second coming of Christ. However, neither his detractors nor his admirers caught the true dimension of the man and his work and the way he was able to simultaneously be a product and propagator of this new revivalism.

### **Graham's Sincerity Questioned**

According to Graham, the most common question asked of him was, "Are you sincere?"<sup>97</sup> While everyone from the Archbishop of Canterbury to many journalists and even agnostic Woody Allen<sup>98</sup> agreed that he was, this explained, nor proved anything. As Graham himself was fond of saying in another context, one of the most sincere men he ever saw was the football player in a bowl game who ran sixty yards with the ball in

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<sup>97</sup> Lowe, 204.

<sup>98</sup> "The Kraft Music Hall Presents The Woody Allen Special." Interview with Billy Graham, September 21, 1969. In his opening remarks, Allen admits while he disagrees with Graham on many things, he recognizes Graham's preeminence and respects his stature and says Graham "is certainly the best in the world at what he does."



the wrong direction. In 1950 Portland, Oregon, a group of more socially minded ministers expressed puzzlement over Graham's success. The magazine *The Christian Century* ran this account: "They agreed that Graham is sincere, but deplored his theological literalism and his personality, his sensationalism, his publicity techniques and his burning conviction that he is indeed a latter-day prophet."<sup>99</sup>

Sincerity often rules out charlatanry, but it does not reveal the nature of the rejuvenation of American Protestantism of which Graham's revivals were the symbol throughout the 1950s, 60s, 70s, 80s, and even into the 90s. Billy Graham, like all previous revivalists, insists that his success is the work of God. "It is not publicity. It is not showmanship, it is not personality, it is not organization, but the hand of God. It is God's doing and it is marvelous in our eyes."<sup>100</sup> Yet even those who accept this view of the supernatural origin of revivals might legitimately ask why God has chosen this particular time and particular place for the recommencement of successful revivalism.

The key to Billy Graham's revivals, like the key to all of America's previous revivals, lies not in the sincerity or the personal talent of the revivalist, but in the social and theological milieu in which the revivalist works as well as the history to which the revivalist owes a debt. If sincerity or charismatic power were the key to revivalism, then the United States would never have been without a revival. It seems the active careers of the leading revivalists from Solomon Stoddard in the 1680s to Billy Sunday, who died in 1935, were sufficiently long-winded to have maintained a constant state of

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<sup>99</sup> Pollock, *Billy Graham: The Authorized Biography*, 91.

<sup>100</sup> Bishop, 33.

religious fervor for 250 years, but this did not happen. Nor is the clue to revivalism to be found in such obvious social crises as wars or depressions. There are no significant correlations between America's periods of revival and wartime or economic distress.<sup>101</sup> In fact, a more significant correlation might be found in America's periods of prosperity primarily because America's history is covered by mostly prosperous periods, but because prosperous periods are so prevalent, it would be inaccurate to see this as the reason as well. It was the notion that America was ripe for revivalism that pushed Graham to neither preach the Gospel of prosperity nor the Gospel of utter damnation, that Graham was able to capitalize upon. In fact, Graham was able to use media to support his message to both the prosperous and the deprived because he stayed away from subjects that would alienate either aspect. William Samarin writes, "Language is transformed or is adapted to the expression of religious propositions. Religious language is therefore unique; it is more than ordinary language serving a religious purpose [...] They take the product and make it a tool, using language not only as a hermeneutical device for the explication of religious assertions, but even as a means to defend their validity."<sup>102</sup> Graham's ability to simultaneously seize the moment in which he stood by neither castigating new ways or lifting up old ones; his ability to use his words carefully as a sword for evangelism and shield to defend his assertions; his ability to use new media techniques and to use the successes of revivalist grandfathers, were the keys in making Graham's ministry successful.

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<sup>101</sup> Rennie, 333.

<sup>102</sup> William J. Samarin, "The Language of Religion," *Language as Religious Practice* (Rowley, MA: Newbury House, 1976) 5.

### **Graham's New Revivalism**

The career of Billy Graham only becomes comprehensible only when it is placed in conjunction with the broad background of American revivalism, especially when it is recognized that professional mass revivalism has, since the early part of the nineteenth century, been an essential and closely integrated function of organized Protestantism. It is true that there have always been eccentric revivalists like Aimee Semple McPherson, Father Divine, Elijah P. Dowie, and James Davenport, to name a few, who were more interested in denouncing the "regular" churches than in assisting them, providing rhetoric that separated the masses, rather than bind them together for the good of the Christian whole. The essence of Graham's ministry and American revivalism has been its note of cooperative enterprise. To go beyond the lowest common denominator, such as attacking the local clergy or even other revivalists, is to jeopardize the united support of the leading clergy and laity whose cooperation is essential to the complex and expensive undertaking which an urban revival entails. The cynic might suggest that the cooperation exercised between religious bodies exists so that they all can succeed; like the adage that a lone gas station dies, while a gas station on every corner of the same intersection thrives, cooperation between religious people is mutually advantageous, but this need not be a negative aspect. Recognizing that the bible has a directive to support other like-minded believers is a dominant theme in Graham's ministry.

This is the essence of Graham's "New Revivalism": the ability to unite various disparate religious bodies into a unified whole through guarded theatricality, simple messages, and intense media organization all the while changing when there is cultural

movement and allowing for change in others as well. Graham has often known that without malleability, great awakenings come to an end. Furthermore, it was because the professional evangelist lost touch with the prevailing trend of American religious and social thought, that failure was the only option. One only has to look at Billy Sunday's staunch fundamentalism which spurred his attacks on Franklin Roosevelt, comparing him to Hitler, Mussolini, and the anti-Christ, while predicting that the New Deal would fail because it was the work of the devil, to see a demonstration of how far out of touch a revivalist could get.

However, even with a concerted effort to unify, Graham fought hard to maintain centrist views, even going against Fundamentalist trends of creating their own Bible-centered cultures within the overall American culture. After an initial period of disorder in the 1920s, the fundamentalists regrouped, reorganized their social and ecclesiastical structure, and consolidated their theological position. Bible schools and colleges like the Moody Bible Institute in Chicago, Wheaton College in Wheaton, Illinois, Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California, and Bob Jones University in Cleveland, Tennessee (now located in Greenville, South Carolina), became centers of this reorganization.<sup>103</sup> The core of fundamentalism, finding their culture completely out of sympathy with the world of the 1920s and 30s, ostensibly withdrew into their corners. They built their own storefront churches, cinderblock tabernacles, and basement gospel halls. Furthermore, they founded hundreds of new Sunday schools,

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<sup>103</sup> Indiana Wesleyan University, where I currently serve as an Assistant Professor, was founded as Marion Normal Institute in 1920 during this mini-revolution.

Christian day-care, Christian grammar and high schools, Bible institutes, and “Bible-honoring” colleges and seminaries. This was the culture in which Billy Graham was born, and learned to partially reject.

As Americans began to reexamine their ideals and beliefs in order to adjust to a new set of circumstances, Graham struck a responsive chord. Amidst the wreckage of so many hopes, Graham reassembled some of the old and cherished symbols of the faith and gave new assurances to those who still held to the time-honored tenets of American and the Christian way of life – in some ways, conflating these notions purposefully especially with his early anti-communist oratory. To this, Graham mixed in a passionate use for, what was at the time, new media forms, and a cleansing rhetoric of inclusiveness. American churchgoers were heartened by Graham’s words quoted in the most widely read periodical, *Time*, in November, 1949: “We are standing on the verge of a great national revival [which drew on Whitefield], an old-fashioned [drawing on Moody], heaven sent [drawing on Jonathan Edwards], Holy Ghost revival [drawing on Sunday] that will sweep this nation.” A year later, after the Korean War had brought the last faint hopes of a peace crashing, Graham’s prediction of revival seemed substantiated. *Time* now announced that “Old-fashioned ‘evangelistic crusades’ which used to be known as revivals, have been staging an impressive comeback.”<sup>104</sup> Graham had become the inheritor of the old form, rising from the ashes as a “Billy Graham Crusade,” building on preachers of the past to form his own, new revivalism.

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<sup>104</sup> “Revival in America,” *Time* (November 12, 1949): 22-25.

Truly, Billy Graham stands in the tradition of American revivalism reaching back to George Whitefield in the eighteenth century, Dwight L. Moody and Charles Grandison Finney in the nineteenth century, and Billy Sunday in the early twentieth. Graham has mastered techniques developed by his predecessors: the use of a large hall or arena for public meetings in spaces that were not ordinarily associated with religious causes, careful advanced planning, sponsorship across denominational lines, campaigns extending over several weeks or months, training local personnel to serve as counselors, holding prayer meetings and auxiliary services before and during a crusade, enriching services with musical presentations and singing, direct appeals to make a religious commitment, and extensive efforts to follow through on conversions.<sup>105</sup>

### **“New” Revivalism Conclusions**

Anyone attempting to find common characteristics among notable Christian preachers might be staggered by their differences. Many of them were refined men, educated at the best schools, like George Whitefield at Oxford, and bearing all the graces of culture, again like Whitefield. Some were brilliant thinkers, profound theologians, or creative geniuses, like Finney. Others were social reformers possessed by visions of human suffering and divine love, like Moody. Some were mystical saints, poetic artists and dreamers, like Sunday. Among each of these different kinds of preachers there are many traits which seem to reveal the secret of true pulpit greatness. They were all simultaneously affected and were affected by thoughts, ideas, and the air

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<sup>105</sup> While Graham attributes the success of his crusades to divine intervention and sanction, critics (good and bad) recognize the human element in the apparatus of a crusade and argue that careful orchestration guarantees results.

of their day. If Stephen Greenblatt has taught us anything, it's that there is a "circulation of social energy" or a "poetics or culture" where the effects of those participating in culture effect and are affected by each other. Secondly, Greenblatt suggests that there are no truly "originary" moments "in which the master hand shapes the concentrated social energy in the sublime aesthetic object."<sup>106</sup> With all these great men's collective greatness, each had their own idiosyncrasies and eccentricities that defy logical categories, but all were impacted by what came before and what was infused in their day. In fact, most of the above precursors and influential evangelicals to Graham, like Graham, were not seminary-trained, came from uncultured backgrounds, and were unrefined by social elitist standards. They were not original thinkers or brilliant theologians; neither saintly mystical nor zealous social reformers distinguished by their ministries. They seemed to be blessed with only one virtue: a profound awareness of the Grace of God in their own lives as well as an obsessive need to call men into that grace which they themselves experienced in Christ by using any means necessary, including the performance trends that were in vogue during their day.

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<sup>106</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988) 7.

## Chapter Three

### “Rewriting the Script”<sup>1</sup>



Despite his harsh criticism of fundamentalist Christianity, historian Martin Marty has described evangelicalism as the characteristic Protestant (and indirectly, American Christian) way of relating to modernity in the United States and an avenue through which real change can occur. Evangelists have often capitalized on Christianity’s ability to harness change in new believers (similar to an alcoholic’s twelve step program). Religion, and in particular, Christianity, provide conduits through which people are empowered to be somewhat self-reflexive and to change; in fact,

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<sup>1</sup> Digital reproduction of Billy Graham “Youth for Christ” poster from The Billy Graham Center Archives (<http://www.wheaton.edu/bgc/archives/exhibits/Posters/04item03.html>). As the archives explains, “‘Biggest event of the Year.’ 1948. Des Moines, Iowa, USA. Newspaper advertisement in the Des Moines Tribune, September 10, 1948. Although described as a Youth for Christ campaign, this meeting was in essence the same as the independent city campaigns that Graham would be leading for the next sixty years. From *Collection 360, Scrapbook 3*.

Digital reproduction of Graham Photo from [http://www.democraticunderground.com/discuss/duboard.php?az=view\\_all&address=132x4432735](http://www.democraticunderground.com/discuss/duboard.php?az=view_all&address=132x4432735).

Digital reproduction of the *Elmer Gantry* movie poster from [http://www.impawards.com/1960/elmer\\_gantry.html002E](http://www.impawards.com/1960/elmer_gantry.html002E).



change must happen otherwise the believers are just playing along. Furthermore, change must actually follow a crisis of faith. To a somewhat surprising degree, however, the observations of Marty contradict tendencies within the broader history of religion, but not in the ways religion, and specifically Christianity, desires of its followers a fluid interchange between sin, remorse, and transformation. When it comes to corporate and personal change, Marty theories move with the work of Samuel Hill, who puts forth the “crisis motif,” stressing that the church has not addressed the needs of society and often needs a “crisis” in its corporate and personal history for changes to be made.<sup>2</sup> This idea of change in the face of crisis fits well when trying to understand Graham’s actions as it relates to the overall history of evangelicalism, especially in America during Graham’s pivotal years of 1948-1961 and the ways in which Graham fought hard to dispel that he was another “Elmer Gantry” bent on bilking the masses for personal gain. Although crisis need not be an all-encompassing event that dictates universal change (perhaps akin to an addict’s lowest point), the crisis needs to have sufficient traction that modification is acted upon in ways that the audience of the actor can see the change. Although sometimes this can seem like the change is done only because the audience seeks homogenization, still change is change and Christianity has its own built-in system of checks and balances that test and approve these changes.

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<sup>2</sup> See Hill, *Southern Churches Crisis*, esp. 193-211; Hill, et al, *Religion and the Solid South*; and Rufus B. Spain, *At Ease in Zion: A Social History of Southern Baptists, 1865-1900* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 1967).

## Billy Performs in the Middle Ground

Billy Graham helped to create and broadcast a middle ground, projecting his ministry as the public face of much of the modern American Evangelicalism for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Even in the face of criticism for Graham's unwillingness to act out more in the Social Gospeler sense upon issues such as racism, abortion, or conservative politics, Graham's creation of a middle ground through a crisis early in his career helped him to find a fertile area of winning believers while staying out of financial, sexual, publicity, and local church trouble. In an interview just prior to his last evangelistic campaign in New York City, Graham told the *New York Times* he would not preach about any of the political issues important to evangelical conservatives, including abortion, homosexuality, and stem cell research. "I'm just going to preach the gospel and am not going to get off on these hot-button issues. If I get on these other subjects, it divides the audience."<sup>3</sup> Graham chose his middle ground carefully. But doing this was not a new thing for the elderly Graham; no, finding the middle road was a conscious effort from the beginnings of his national ministry.

Graham's move toward the center was theological as well as political and, by the most part, was a reaction to critique from both sides, but it was reflected in his performances. In moving towards the center, Graham found it useful to become more ambiguous in his preaching, knowing that if he were to become more concrete he would split the broad base of his support. He could remain a symbol of Protestant

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<sup>3</sup> James L. Evans, "Billy Graham's Final Crusade," *Sightings* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, July 7, 2005).

Christendom only so long as he was regarded as a rallying center around which all people interested in good things may gather. But there was danger in being all things to all people, incurring the charge by Reinhold Niebuhr as preaching “bland pietism,” “perfectionist escapism,” and “simple obscurantism.”<sup>4</sup>

### **Graham’s Self-Reflection in the Face of Crisis**

Simply put, Graham has been accused of being too liberal by the fundamentalists, too fundamental by the modernists, and too simple to all. These attacks have come in many forms, but the one to influence his performance of preaching the most came in the form of the 1927 Sinclair Lewis novel, and the 1960 movie, *Elmer Gantry*, which starred Burt Lancaster and directed by Richard Brooks. The attack had the most effect because Graham was familiar with Sinclair Lewis’ book, reading it in 1948 (or at least rereading it in 1948; it is not known for certain when the first time Graham read *Elmer Gantry*) and deciding not to embody the tenets of the huckster preacher. In his autobiography, *Just as I am*, Graham writes,

The day after the closing meeting on December 10 [1950], the *Atlanta Constitution*, accompanying its wrap-up story of the Crusade, printed two pictures side by side. In the first, I was grinning broadly and waving good-bye as I stepped into a car for my departure to South Carolina. In the next, two Crusade ushers, with a uniformed police sergeant between them, could barely wrap their arms around four bulging money sacks.

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<sup>4</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Proposal to Billy Graham,” *Christian Century* 73 (8 August 1956): 921-22.

“GRAHAM ‘LOVE OFFERING’ COLLECTED AT FINAL SERVICE,” read the caption. I was horrified by the implication. Was I an Elmer Gantry who had successfully fleeced another flock? Many might just decide I was.<sup>5</sup>

Graham’s reading of Lewis’ book in 1948 coupled with the 1960 movie of the same name provide bookends to Graham’s early career and also offer understanding of how Graham and his ministry changed during this time because of this crisis in his ministry. In fact, the movie’s impact on Graham was seen as a testament to Graham’s ability to evolve through these early “crises,” rather than devolve into past preacher pitfalls. This change of strategy has its roots in November of 1948 when Graham’s new ministerial team of George Beverly Shea, Grady Wilson, and Cliff Barrows headed to Modesto, California, for an early campaign. One afternoon during the Modesto meetings, Billy called them together to discuss the potential problems of evangelizing in traveling revivalist meetings (The Modesto Manifesto is discussed earlier in Introduction). The issues they resolved to not be affected by were money, sexual immorality, discord with local churches, and truth in publicity – these “rules” became known outside Graham’s inner circle as “The Modesto Manifesto” (inside Graham’s circle, they were just known as personal guidelines). Billy Graham told biographer William Martin who paraphrased Graham, “I don’t think they ever had a calligrapher write it up so they could have it laminated. But they never had a lot of trouble

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<sup>5</sup> Graham, *Just As I Am*, 185.

remembering what they were supposed to watch out for – with money and sex at the top of the list.”<sup>6</sup>

- *Money*: Nearly all evangelists, including Graham, depended on “love offerings,” which were taken at local meetings. The temptation was to use strong emotional appeals to garner additional funds, but because there was little or no accountability for the funds, it would be easy for the evangelist to abuse the system. Graham’s team decided to do everything they could to be accountable and to avoid financial abuses. They also decided to downplay the offering and depend on the local committee to raise as much money as possible beforehand so “love offerings” would not be needed.
- *Sexual Morality*: Evangelists were often separated from their families during long periods of time and could be tempted with immorality (at least to do things that were disparate with what they were preaching for or against). The team pledged to avoid even the appearance of compromise. From that day forward, Graham never traveled alone, nor did he meet or eat alone with any woman other than his wife (including his teenage daughters).
- *Utilizing the Local Church*: Previous to the Modesto Manifesto, evangelists often conducted their ministry apart from the local church, moving in right under the local church’s auspices. Sometimes they openly criticized the local pastors and their work at the meetings (Billy Sunday was known for his ire leveled against local officials). The team was convinced that such actions were not only

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<sup>6</sup> William Martin, *A Prophet With Honor*, 219?.

counterproductive, but also against what the Bible taught. They pledged to publicly support the local church and to avoid any anti-clergy attitudes.

- *Publicity:* Again, prior to Graham's agreement, many evangelists tended to exaggerate the number of attendees or converts at an event to either make their ministry more notable or to help the publicity at the next locale. The practice could lead people to not trust the work of the evangelist and their message. Billy and his team committed themselves to honesty and integrity in the reporting of any facts or figures related to the campaigns. Furthermore, they decided not to quibble with local and national press over numbers. When it came to numbers drawn or money brought in, whatever the press said, they would not argue.

### **Changes in Depravity: Sin as Antagonist**

In addition to Graham's move toward corporal purity (including spiritual, financial, and sexual morality) in his ministry, he also moved theologically to the center as well. From 1950-1960, Graham made calculated adjustments in his theology and methodology, with some of the proof of these changes coming with how Graham wrote his messages -- his scripts if you will. A piece of the problem was who would Graham include in crusades; would he target non-evangelicals or would he work through evangelical churches? Because Graham chose to include non-evangelicals within his crusade methodology, he gradually adjusted his theology, straddling the fence because he knew that he must depend on the local church for assistance in all his exploits.

These choices had repercussions. First, he steadily modified his theology to be more tolerable to non-evangelical participants while continuing to preach the cross and

instantaneous conversion, and while continuing to use the “invitation” system for recruiting new converts. Second, Graham’s view of mission changed to adjust to his changed theology, including social responsibility (works) as a distinctive and separate mission of the church, rather than as an expected derivative of individual conversion (present in Graham’s pre-1948 ministry). Third, Graham began to broaden his appeal to include Roman Catholics in his crusades as well as other “higher” church models.

The question was asked of Graham over and over again why he felt the need to invite such differentiated people into his crusades while preaching a more watered-down version of the Gospel that was not as “offensive” as his pre-1948 messages. The questions generally came from two camps: modernists who thought Graham was bilking his increasing audiences; and fundamentalists who thought Graham’s theological move was going against the “will of God” and his pre-1948 Calvinistic message. One thing is certain however, Graham sought a more positive gospel and adapted a more mainstream theological script. If we follow Graham’s theological stance as it pertains to “depravity” and sin, main tenets of Calvinist doctrine, Graham’s move toward the theological center becomes more apparent. Furthermore, to see Graham as his own playwright of sorts, understanding his message and how his audience understood the metaphors and conflicts he was asserting, make it keenly known that his desire was to find a playable script for his audiences.

Before Graham achieved any form of national prominence, his theology was clearly strictly fundamentalist, partly brought on from his upbringing in a strict Bible home and church, as well as his training at the Florida Bible Institute. An example of

this fundamentalism is in Graham's sermon, "A Midnight Tragedy," where Graham used a litany of verses on the sinfulness of mankind:

Today God is weighing you by His own standard. As you are being weighted in the balance, God says:

- 1) "There is no man that sinneth not" (I Kings 8:46).
- 2) "There is no many which sinneth not" (II Chron. 6:36).
- 3) "There is none good but one, that is, God" (Matt. 19:17).
- 4) "What then? Are we better than they? No, in no wise: for we have before proved both Jews and Gentiles, that they are all under sin" (Rom 3:9).
- 5) "There is none righteous, no, not one" (Rom 3:10).
- 6) "There is none that doeth good, no, not one" (Rom 3:12; Ps. 14:3).
- 7) "There is no difference: for all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:22-23).
- 8) "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (I John 1:8).

You are nervous and afraid. From the depths of your heart and soul you want these scales to balance. How can you balance them? Where can you turn?<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Billy Graham, "A Midnight Tragedy," in *Calling Youth to Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1948) 59.



If God was the protagonist, then man's sin was his antagonist. Like any playwright, Graham fed his audiences good conflict, producing dramatic relationships on his pulpit stage.

This sermon reveals that the prior to the 1949 Los Angeles Crusade, Graham believed in total depravity (a strict Calvin precept), or at least preached that this was so. During that same time, Graham used the term "total depravity" when condemning the shallowness of local church preaching (a habit that, as described earlier, Graham and his team would forfeit). "Thousands of these men have denied that the Bible is the Word of God. Thousands of men standing behind the sacred desk today lied when they spoke their ordination vows. They deny the blood atonement; they deny the virgin birth; they deny the bodily resurrection of Christ; they deny the total depravity of man."<sup>8</sup> Yet, after his infamous rise, Graham opted for a gentler suggestion of mankind, the local church, and his role, shifting his emphasis so as to make Man the protagonist and sin his antagonist. God was still there, but Graham's script changed so as to emphasize man and his conflict. A clear technique for any playwright is to try to make the characters applicable to the audience. It could be argued that Graham was merely trying to make the characters in his "sin" story more relevant and personal.

### **Sin as Rebellion**

Additionally, the early Graham viewed individual/personal sin as rebellion against God's law. For instance: "[God] hates the lust in your heart; He hates the

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<sup>8</sup> Billy Graham, "America's Hope," in *Calling Youth to Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1948) 23.

wickedness in your heart; He hates the immorality in your heart; He hates the sin in your heart. The pride, the stubbornness, the rebellion of your soul as well – God hates it with holy hatred: the Scripture teaches that.”<sup>9</sup> This example is one of many that depict Graham’s usual script that he viewed sin in individual terms, stating, “[...] before we can have a new social order the individual must have a new birth.”<sup>10</sup> To audiences this must have felt very pointed and dreadfully personal.

In fact, Graham preached on the issue of sin from an individual point of view in most of his early messages. His script at this time seemed to play well so he had little reason to change it. While the early Graham preached on concepts related to total depravity, later in his messages, he ceased to use “total” teaching instead that depravity belonged to all mankind, due to the original sin of Adam. Because of man’s state of sin in Adam and because of man’s nature of individual sin was considered spiritually dead. Thus, sin affected man’s relationship with God.<sup>11</sup> In his 1951 sermon, “Grace versus Wrath,” Graham said:

There can be no question that the Scriptures teach that the devil is the “god of this Age,” the present evil world system – that the carnal mind is enmity against God – that they that are in the flesh cannot please God, and that God in Christ was despised and rejected of men [...] It is the nature of

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<sup>9</sup> Billy Graham, “Will God Spare America?” *America’s Hour of Decision* (Wheaton, IL: Van Kampen, 1951) 120-121.

<sup>10</sup> Billy Graham, “Christianism versus Communism,” *Hour of Decision Sermons*, no. 2. (Minneapolis: Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, 1951) 8-9.

<sup>11</sup> See Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998) 635.

man to run from God [...] Two thousand years ago they rejected God, “The Son,” and today the same spirit of depravity is causing men to reject the call of God through the “Holy Spirit.”<sup>12</sup>

To Graham, sin pointed directly to the cross:

It was not only universal sin which held Jesus to the cross – it was YOUR sin. If your sins are not responsible for Calvary, then Calvary has no responsibility for your sins. God, knowing the hearts of all man, and that they were only evil continually [Genesis 6:5], offered His Son to die for all men: those living and those yet unborn. Calvary is the place of decision. It is the eternal sword, erected to divide men into two classes, the saved and the lost. Embrace its truth and be saved. Reject it and be lost.<sup>13</sup>

As his quote of Genesis 6:5 suggests,<sup>14</sup> the early Graham discussed sin in close accordance to the doctrine of total depravity, although, because he was distancing himself from fundamentalism, his view turned to a more merciful and ecumenical position of “moral depravity.” By changing a key part of his script, the message was also changed which allowed audiences to see the metaphor of sin rather than the individual nature of sin. Good playwrights will often use a metaphorical situation to help explain character dilemma’s that actually have a bigger social relevance to the

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<sup>12</sup> Billy Graham, “Grace versus Wrath,” *Hour of Decision Sermons*, no. 7 (Minneapolis: Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, 1951) 2, 4-5.

<sup>13</sup> Billy Graham, “Labor, Christ and the Cross,” *Hour of Decision Sermons* (Minneapolis: Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, 1953) 7.

<sup>14</sup> Genesis 6:5 “The LORD saw how great man’s wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time.” (NIV)

society. Drawing realistic lines between character conflict and present social conflict can often turn audiences off from the intended message; but when the script is adjusted to sound more metaphorical, audiences adapt to the message and seek connections.

For instance, consider a play like Eugene Ionesco's *Rhinoceros*. Since writing it in 1960 critics have speculated that the playwright's intention was to draw parallels between the rise of fascism and people turning into rhinoceroses on stage. The metaphor is complete when the protagonist (Berenger) refuses to give into the societal pressure to conform despite the efforts of his friend (Botard) and his girlfriend (Daisy). However, if Ionesco would have drawn realistic lines between the rise of fascism and used characteristic fascist symbols, this notion might have been too didactic for his audiences. Instead, by using a (in this case, humorous) metaphorical implementation, audiences were allowed to see the connections without being blamed themselves for the problem. Graham did the same thing. He allowed his audiences to see the problem (sin), but he also allowed them to see that it was, at least, partly corporate and not totally their individual dilemma.

Although only Graham knows for sure, throughout Graham's ministry there seemed to be a change from a strict theology script to a more rewarding, personal/lifestyle evangelistic script with a plainness that was built for his audiences. To this Graham said, "The average religious intelligence of an American is that of a twelve year old. Therefore the preaching of today must be in utter simplicity almost as

if you were talking to children.”<sup>15</sup> Very early in his ministry Graham leaned his scripts towards messages with themes built on a “total depravity” theology; after 1948, however, Graham did not fully express the concept of total depravity, which, as some speculate, actually started his rise to a more theological palatable and uncomplicated position for the general American populace. Timo Pokki wrote of Graham, “Even if ‘total depravity’ is a very important concept for Graham, he maintains that man was created for freedom and something of this original freedom is still left in man because intellect and will are the things which constitute the *imago Dei*.”<sup>16</sup> However, even with Graham’s Calvinist training in the Baptist church, it is interesting to note that when Graham uses the term “depravity” he does not use it in Calvinistic terms, rather,

As regards the interpretation of *total depravity*, Graham comes close to John Wesley, whose doctrine of total depravity differed from Lutheran and Calvinist diagnoses of the human condition on at least two points. The twofold clue is in (1) Wesley’s essentially catholic view of sin as a malignant disease rather than an obliteration of the *imago Dei* in fallen human nature, and (2) in his displacement of the doctrine of ‘election’

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<sup>15</sup> Qtd. in McLoughlin, *Billy Graham: Revivalist in a Secular Age*, 223.

<sup>16</sup> Timo Pokki, *America's preacher and his message: Billy Graham's view of conversion and sanctification* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1999) 79. Pokki goes into great detail regarding Graham’s move from a “total depravity” stance to a more ecumenical one. (“*imago Dei*” or “The Image of God” is a concept and theological doctrine that asserts that human beings are created in God’s image and therefore have inherent value independent of their utility or function.)

with the notion of “prevenient grace,” which creates new possibilities for human existence.<sup>17</sup>

This subtle change, while it might have alienated Graham’s original constituency, allows Graham the choice of who he might speak to, essentially using the term described earlier as “shifts of footing.”<sup>18</sup> By editing his script, Graham, as playwright of his message, was trying to get his message to more people.

### **Graham Moves Toward Free Will**

Graham was starting to develop his monologues similarly to John Wesley’s strong view of man’s free will. In an early sermon, Graham stated, “You are a free moral agent! God did not create you as a machine to be compelled to love him! You have the power of free choice.”<sup>19</sup> Strangely though, Graham simultaneously held this view while still holding onto total depravity. This created a problem or disconnect in his theology. However, some theologians objected to Graham’s view of depravity saying it essentially adhered to a practical belief that the will was untainted by sin, since Graham was also calling individuals to repent and believe. Earlier in his preaching career (prior to 1948), Graham believed that outside of the work of the Holy Spirit man was incapable of repenting. After 1948, however, Graham continued to maintain God’s role in salvation when he wrote, “We need and desire to be filled and controlled by the

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<sup>17</sup> Pokki, 79.

<sup>18</sup> See Chapter 3’s reference on Graham’s celebrity referring to Erving Goffman, *Forms of Talk* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1981).

<sup>19</sup> Billy Graham, “Hell,” *Calling Youth to Christ*, 129. (Similar language can be found in Graham’s sermon “Steps to Peace with God.”)

Holy Spirit as we bear witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, because God alone can turn sinners from their sin and bring them to everlasting life.”<sup>20</sup>

Although Graham’s emphasis on free will was constant throughout his ministry, he also seemed to “dip” into other theological traditions. Pokki called Graham’s paradoxical ideas of sin as “*complexion oppositorum*,” because Graham called people to repentance as well. Pokki writes that Calvinists believe that “man is completely alienated from God,” and Arminians believe that “every human being as the image of God still has some kind of capability to obey God’s law and be obedient to Him with the aid of some kind of prevenient grace.”<sup>21</sup> Pokki accused Graham of trying to hold these contradictory views in a balance. However, perhaps Graham’s view of total depravity and freewill were not as contradictory as Pokki wrote.

Immediately following 1948, Graham seems to reject the theological notion of man’s “total depravity.” Graham continued to preach sin as an individual transgression of the law of God, but his theological positioning moved so that his previous “fire and brimstone” approach would be more palatable to his growing public. While it was easier to preach to Baptists using their forms of language (see William Samarin discussed in an earlier chapter), it becomes increasingly difficult to preach to a growing congregation that included non-Baptists such as Catholics, Lutherans, and Wesleyans, with the same “man is inherently and totally sinful” script. A shift had to be made to stay theologically and socially relevant. Again, it would be impossible to

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<sup>20</sup> Billy Graham, *A Biblical Standard for Evangelists* (Minneapolis: World Wide Publications, 1984) 65.

<sup>21</sup> Pokki, *America’s Preacher*, 76-77.

know if this move was made out of necessity or a change of heart, but there was definitely a change brewing in Graham's position after 1948, when he began to hit the itinerant circuit, preaching throughout the United States. It seems no coincidence that this move simultaneously increased his profile and his increased profile affected his new theological positioning.

### **Graham's Finalizes His Script: "The Love of God" Sermon**

The defining evidence of this move comes in 1955 when Graham's script finalized. Like a playwright trying out different bits of dialogue between characters, Graham's script gives the impression to have solidified in 1955's *Hour of Decision* Sermon, "The Love of God." After 1955, Graham's script was what it was, a peaceful, loving, and all together ecumenical approach that was open to people from many traditions. Some, such as William Dale Apel, assume Graham's view of depravity had a manipulative bent to it:

For example, what we usually fail to recognize in Graham's denouncement of depraved man is the polemical nature of Graham's preaching. He does not degrade man because he believes man to be totally depraved; rather he shames man in order to convict him as a sinner who is in need of salvation. In other words, Graham does not preach a low anthropology primarily as a theological conviction. Instead, his low anthropology is used as a homiletical technique to bring sinners to ask how they might be saved.



After all, if Billy Graham were truly convinced of man's total depravity, he could not hold the possibility of each man's personal salvation.<sup>22</sup>

And while this might be true to a certain extent, the 1955 sermon, "The Love of God" provides a seamless transition and helps bridge the gap between the two seemingly disparate views.

By 1955, Graham already had had incredible success with his radio program, "The Hour of Decision," heard by over 10 million people by this time. The individual sermons were so sought after that the BGEA belatedly started printing the sermons and handing them out as tracts at revivals, sending them in the mail to donators, and publishing them for local churches. By the time the BGEA printed sermon 100, many important Graham sermons were already being repeated two or more times in the *Hour of Decision* sermon series, both on the radio, now on television, and in crusades. For example, Graham's sermon on revival was perhaps the most repetitious. The sermon "We Need Revival" was published in the 1950 *Revival in Our Time*. Graham's *Hour of Decision* sermon 15 was "Revival or Disintegration," sermon 51, "Revival Today," sermon 64, "The Revival We Need," and sermon 92, "Revival or the Spirit of the Age." This theme continued into the late 1950s diminishing after Graham's New York revival in 1957.

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<sup>22</sup> William Dale Apel, "The Understanding of Salvation in the Evangelistic Message of Billy Graham: A Historical-Theological Evaluation" (PhD diss. Northwestern University, 1975) 48.

Graham repeated other sermon themes as well, including the theme on accepting persecution for the sake of Christ. *Hour of Decision* sermon 17 is titled, "Branded." Then the same theme is picked up in sermon 55, "Scars of Battle." By sermon 100, many of Graham's key published sermons had been revised at least once with only subtle changes in his use of illustrations and approaches to theological issues. These changes provide important information on the subtle changes in Graham's theological script. As mentioned earlier, Graham was making changes in his overall script to provide the most benefit and understanding for all his audience members, be they from the written "monologue," from the crusades, or from hearing them on radio or television.

To provide even clearer evidence of Graham's changing script, it is important to note the revisions made in these sermons, especially in his *Hour of Decision* series. For example, Graham's 1955 sermon number 52, titled "The Love of God," went through two revisions, one at an unknown date, and another in 1995. The first sermon reported on his Scotland crusade in 1955: "One of the truths we have been emphasizing over and over again is the love God. More than any other Crusade that we have ever led, it seemed to be the dominant theme of song and word. Never before did we present so many messages with the theme of the love of God as in Scotland."<sup>23</sup> "The Love of God" sermon was Graham's first *Hour of Decision* sermon devoted to the love of God, and from his own words, it indicates a change of emphasis in his script. It is interesting that this prominence came at a time when Graham adjusted his view of sin, especially as

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<sup>23</sup> Billy Graham, "The Love of God," *Hour of Decision*, no. 52 (Minneapolis: BGEA, 1955) 2.

Graham refers to it in his 1955 book, *The Seven Deadly Sins*. Contrast this with Graham's first *Hour of Decision* sermon is titled "Hate vs. Love": out of the ten pages in this sermon, two and a half pages are given over to love, the remainder addressed some kind of hatred. "The Love of God," however, was revised and republished twice and has the exact opposite ratio. Out of the eleven full pages, 3 pages deal with what God dislikes, while 8 pages deal with what God loves. The first revision or "The Love of God" occurred at an unknown time (there is no date attached to the revision, nor is there a recording of the revision that could be found) when the introduction was changed from the second person plural "they" to the first person plural, "we"; two pages were added to the conclusion; and some other minor changes were made, but to content or theological positioning. Now, to be fair, by this time Graham employed editors for his sermons when they went to print, but Graham continued to personally write his sermons and these sermons formed the basis for the *Hour of Decision* publications.<sup>24</sup>

One passage in the first 1955 "The Love of God" sermon typifies the changes made to the sermon and shows how other sermons were updated throughout Graham's ministry. In the 1955 version, Graham spoke about the tree in the garden:

It was love, the love of God which was so concerned for man's welfare that He carefully marked the only danger spot in this exquisite garden of

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<sup>24</sup> In 1995 this sermon was again revised and republished, changing "man" to "person" and "his" to "his or her."

God. "Eat of every other tree," said God, "but not this one. There is death in this one."

*Somehow in a way known only to God Himself, sin, that mysterious element of evil unleashed in the universe, had inoculated that particular tree and God in love warned His creature not to partake of it. It was love which moved God to seek out man after he had made that fatal blunder and against God's warning eaten of that tree [sic]. It was love which made God, perhaps in tones of stark disappointment, cry out, "Where art thou, Adam?" and then begin the long weary, planning in preparation for man to return to himself.*<sup>25</sup>

The 1955 revised version reads as follows:

It was love, the love of God, which was so concerned for man's welfare that He carefully marked the only danger spot in this exquisite garden of God. "Eat of every other tree," said God, "but not of this one. There is death in this one."

[The next sentence is omitted] It was love which moved God to seek out man after he had made that fatal blunder and had, in spite of God's warning, eaten of that tree.

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<sup>25</sup> Billy Graham, "The Love of God," *Hour of Decision*, no. 52 (Minneapolis: BGEA, 1955) 5; (emphasis added).

It was love which made God call out, "Where art thou, Adam?" It was love which initiated God's preparation for man to return to himself.<sup>26</sup>

Finally, the following is the reading of the text in the 1995 version<sup>27</sup>:

It was love, the love of God, which was so concerned for men and women's welfare that he carefully marked the only danger spot in this exquisite garden of God. "Eat of every other tree," said God, "but not of this one. There is death in this one."

It was love which moved God to seek out the man and the woman after they made that fatal blunder and had, in spite of God's warning, eaten of that tree.

It was love which made God call out, "Where art thou, Adam?" It was love which initiated God's preparation for us to return to Himself.<sup>28</sup>

In these versions, Graham tenders an interesting view of the "Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil" by stating, "That mysterious element of evil unleashed in the universe, had inoculated that particular tree." Graham felt the center of sin was not in the disobedience of the command, but a "mysterious element of evil" in the tree. It should be noted that most biblical scholars see this reading as not holding to the Hebraic metaphor of the tree. Old Testament scholars C. F. Keil and Franz Delitzsch

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<sup>26</sup> Billy Graham, "The Love of God," rev. ed. (Minneapolis: BGEA) 4.

<sup>27</sup> Although outside the purview of this study, recognizing the changes in Graham's script over time is helpful to understand the argument presented.

<sup>28</sup> Billy Graham, "The Love of God," 2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed. (Minneapolis: BGEA, 1995) 4.

discount the possibility of any material wrong with the Tree's fruit, but rather attribute it as a test of man's obedience to God's law, which would give them true knowledge of good and evil.<sup>29</sup>

Graham's original 1955 version (before the first revision) sought to explain the evil in the Tree and was removed in the two later additions (see the emphasized text). This indicates a change in his view of the "Fall of Man." Graham appears to explain the "Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil" outside the defiance to the direct prohibition of God. "The Love of God" marked the change to which Graham's original 1955 introduction may have attested. Overlaying the love of God over the prohibition in the Garden of Eden led to an unusual interpretation of the "Fall of Man." Whereas Graham post-1948 used "Total Depravity" and spoke of Adam as the "Federal Head" of the human race, this 1955 sermon marks a change in Graham that is found in other places as well.

### **Graham's Social Dimension**

While Graham still preached that individual sin was a direct offense to God, "The Bible tells us that sin is more than overt acts that cause difficulties and troubles in this life. The Bible teaches that sin is an offense to God,"<sup>30</sup> Graham added a social dimension to sin that was not found before 1948. Again, this seems to be good indication that Graham's script was changing in hope of clearing a wider swath of

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<sup>29</sup> C.F. Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *The First Book of Moses* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1986) 85-86.

<sup>30</sup> Billy Graham, "Great Sin! Greater Salvation!" *Hour of Decision Sermons*, no. 137 (Minneapolis: BGEA, 1961) 5.

theological hurdles. This view can also be supported in Graham's 1955 book, *Freedom from the Seven Deadly Sins* (revised in 1960), which seems to be marketed directly to the Roman Catholic segment of his viewing/listening audience as well as, again, redefining his concept of sin.

The seven sins were traditionally called cardinal or "capital" sins by the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>31</sup> Graham even acknowledges that their origin came from Pope Gregory the Great (590-604)<sup>32</sup> as this first patriarch to be called "Pope" gathered the Latin-speaking church under his auspices. However, when taken as a whole, the cardinal sins may be understood as a reinterpretation of the doctrine of sin and that of atonement on the part of Gregory the Great. This redefinition of salvation was confirmed by the fact that Gregory the Great was the first Roman Catholic leader to posit the addition of purgatory to salvation.<sup>33</sup> Taking his cue from Gregory the Great's broadening of the concept of sin, while still trying to understand the concept more completely, the indication is that Graham was also expanding his view of sin to include social sin, a concept outside the typical confines of Graham's Calvinistic training.

In *Freedom from the Seven Deadly Sins*, Graham communicated new concepts in his theology. In his writing, Graham addresses the first cardinal sin, that of pride, and more specifically, self-righteousness. In this point, Graham attacked "those who think

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<sup>31</sup> The Seven Deadly sins are called "capital" because they engender other sins or vices. They are pride, avarice, envy, wrath, lust, gluttony, and sloth (or acedia); taken from *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraph 1866, 457.

<sup>32</sup> Billy Graham, *Freedom from the Seven Deadly Sins* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1955) 9.

<sup>33</sup> Henry H. Howorth, *Gregory the Great* (London: J. Murray, 1912) 264.

they have a corner on the Gospel.”<sup>34</sup> Graham goes onto write, “There are also others who think themselves to be pure and all others impure. They have forgotten that there is no such thing as a completely pure church.”<sup>35</sup> Graham then tackled intellectual pride, pride in material things, and lastly, social pride. Graham extended this point by writing, “Then there is social pride. This manifests itself in class, racial and caste arrogance [...] There are few people today who really believe in the super race. The idea of a super race is unbiblical, unscriptural and unchristian.”<sup>36</sup> To these points, Graham did not provide scriptural support which might have indicated another script change to make sure his points were not lost on the un-churched. So, while Graham’s earlier intent was to welcome in people of all Christian faiths, using this language also invites those who have no church background into a common language of mankind, capitalizing on fairness and socially acceptable truth.

In his chapter on the cardinal sin of anger, Graham spoke of anger as revealing an animal trait in man, “Anger is a heinous sin because it reveals the animal nature of man,”<sup>37</sup> which also seems to turn away from the anti-evolutionary rhetoric of his early

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<sup>34</sup> Graham, *Freedom from the Seven Deadly Sins*, 18.

<sup>35</sup> Graham, *Freedom from the Seven Deadly Sins*, 18. In these statements Graham purposefully distanced himself from fundamentalists.

<sup>36</sup> Billy Graham, “Pride,” *Freedom from the Seven Deadly Sins* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1955) 23.

<sup>37</sup> Billy Graham, “Anger,” *Freedom from the Seven Deadly Sins* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1955) 29.



scripts.<sup>38</sup> Likewise, in chapter five on gluttony, Graham quoted Amos 6:4 (“You lie on beds inlaid with ivory and lunge on your couches. You dine on choice lambs and fattened calves”), and then writes, “Three fifths of the world live in squalor, misery and hunger. Too long have the privileged few exploited and ignored the underprivileged millions of the world. Our selfishness is at long catching up with us. Unless we begin to act, to share, and to do something about this great army of starving humanity. God will judge us.”<sup>39</sup> Again, Graham is calling for a direct move away from old forms and habits. In this particular sermon, Graham described the sin of gluttony in a societal sense. In fact, later in the sermon he stated that the sin of gluttony, “as one of the worst of all sins.” When he added gluttony as a societal sin, his view of mission immediately responded to this theological change. He moved from the universal imperative of preaching the gospel to stating, “Unless we begin to act, share, and to do something about this great army of starving humanity, God will judge us [...] We are not only to witness for Christ with our lips, but with our hands.”<sup>40</sup> The inclusion of witness with our hands with witness with our lips signified that Graham was placing the humanitarian alongside the spiritual. For Graham, faith without works was like a resounding gong.<sup>41</sup> This was a seismic statement for Graham to make in 1955, a

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<sup>38</sup> In Graham’s early ministry he spoke plainly about the dangers of Darwinism: “Evolutionists deny direct creation as taught in the Bible. They deny a personal, creating God” (discussed in Graham’s “America’s Hope,” page 21).

<sup>39</sup> Billy Graham, “Gluttony,” *Freedom from the Seven Deadly Sins* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1955) 78-79.

<sup>40</sup> Graham, “Gluttony,” p. 78-79.

<sup>41</sup> I Corinthians 1:13.

noticeable social shift in Graham's approach to sin and his desire to change his script to make sure all listeners, both the church of various faiths and the unchurched, could seize something from his message as well as turning away from fundamentalists who rely on the notion that it is *only* through grace, based on faith, that mankind is saved.<sup>42</sup>

### **Graham Moves to the Theological Center**

Up to this point it has been helpful to see exactly what Graham has spoken or written to pinpoint Graham's changing script, but it is also supportive to see what others have written to note the shifting message as well. For instance, Stanley High, in his biography of Graham, added credence to the viewpoint that Graham's view of sin broadened considerably after 1948. High was an insider to the Graham team and had atypical access to the growing evangelical giant, but still, his biography was not an "authorized" view of Graham, one of the last times the BGEA allowed such contact without careful control of the communication. In 1956, High used Graham's own words to define Graham's version of sin quoting Graham, "All men are sinners: 'The Bible teaches 'all have sinned and come short.' There is a real Hell, 'an eternal judgment' toward which, aided by a real Satan, unrepentant man is headed. 'Essentially, Hell is separation from God.'"<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Ephesians 2:8.

<sup>43</sup> High, 61.

High concludes that imbedded in Graham's definition of sin, Graham is creating room for the Social Gospel<sup>44</sup> and preaching on this concept more in more:

He [Graham] himself has said, "The Gospel is both vertical and horizontal. The vertical signifies our relationship to God. The horizontal signifies the application of the principles of the teachings of Christ to our daily lives. At least a third of my preaching is spent encouraging and teaching people to apply the principles of Christianity in their personal and social lives...I would like to say emphatically that any Gospel that preaches only vertical relationships is only a half-Gospel; that a Gospel that preaches only horizontal relationships is only a half-Gospel. The message of evangelism must be for the whole man."<sup>45</sup>

That declaration - which I doubt Billy Graham would have made ten years ago - is evidence, I think, that the social implications of the Gospel will be increasingly emphasized in his preaching. Those implications, however, are still considerably short of central to his concern. The righteousness he calls for with such authority in his preaching is still very largely a one-part matter of man's personally righteous relationship to his God, and not yet very insistently a two-part

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<sup>44</sup> Remember that D.L. Moody was the first to be credited with raising the issue of the Social Gospel as fundamental to a Christian's faith as discussed in Chapter 3.

<sup>45</sup> High, 61.

matter having, as its second part, man's socially righteous relationship to his fellows.<sup>46</sup>

High goes onto say that Graham's idea of the Christian's social obligations is still too limited and extends too seldom to the Christian in his corporate, and communal, relationships. Again, High quotes Graham: "'Every message that I preach,' says Billy Graham, 'carries with it social implications and social responsibilities.' Inadequate and obscure though that emphasis may sometimes seem to be, no one can hear or read many of his sermons without being aware that it is on the increase."<sup>47</sup>

High noted that Graham's social emphasis was "on the increase." Several years later, Donald Bloesch said the same thing about Graham when he wrote in 1960, "Graham has shown that he will listen to constructive criticism, however, and it is hope that he will move to challenge the deeper levels of cultural and national idolatry of our time just as did the Old Testament prophets in their time."<sup>48</sup> In fact, Graham did listen to constructive criticism both from socially-minded theologians who were attacking him in his early ministry as well as liberally-minded Hollywood producers later in his ministry. These early and later criticisms provide bookends that show how he changed his script and how he approached his audiences. Furthermore, Graham's 1960 sermon, "Needed! Strong Men," suggests that he read both Stanley High and Donald Bloesch.

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<sup>46</sup> High, 62.

<sup>47</sup> High, 62.

<sup>48</sup> Donald Bloesch, "Billy Graham: A Theological Appraisal," *Theology and Life* 3 (May 1960): 141.

In his radio sermon, "Needed! Strong Men," Graham preached on a uniquely American social/political subject equating Communism with American greed:

The second enemy [the first being Communism] that America faces is inflation caused by greed and selfishness. If we go on spending ourselves deeper in debt, it will only be a matter of time until the American dollar will lose its stability and confidence of the world. This is already beginning to happen as millions of dollars worth of gold flow out of this country every month. Few people realize that this is one of the objectives of the Communists - to get us to spend more and more on ourselves until we are financially bankrupt. President Eisenhower has seen this danger and has done his best to support the American dollar and to stop inflation that threatens the very structure of this country.<sup>49</sup>

Graham then warns Americans from seeking a higher standard of living at the expense of those around the world who are living in abject poverty:

To a people seeking only for ease and wealth, the Prophet Amos once cried, "Ye that put far away the evil day, and cause the seat of violence to come near; That lie upon beds of ivory, and stretch themselves upon their couches, and eat the lambs out of the flock, and the calves out of the midst of the stall; That chant to the sound of the viol, and invent to themselves instruments of music, like David; That drink wine in bowls, and anoint

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<sup>49</sup> Billy Graham, "Needed! Strong Men," *Hour of Decision Sermons*, no. 130 (Minneapolis: BGEA, 1960): 7.

themselves with the chief ointments: but they are not grieved for the affliction of Joseph" (Amos 6:3-6).<sup>50</sup>

Notice that even though Graham's script now strongly incorporates the social sense of sin, his attack is quite nebulous, not really attacking anyone or anything in particular. However, in many ways, no matter which way Graham changed his script, he could not win. Interestingly, E. Stanley Jones, in a 1957 letter to the editor of the *Christian Century* also noted that Graham was moving away from his fundamentalist roots towards a synthesis with modernist theology. Jones called this a "higher synthesis" writing, "Billy Graham's crusade, while having things here and there which may not be wholly acceptable, nevertheless is a very healthy meeting place for conservative and liberal, and in the contract each may gain something from the other and then something beyond each may emerge - the Christian."<sup>51</sup> George M. Marsden<sup>52</sup> affirmed Jones' stance as well as William G. McLoughlin, in his *Billy Graham: Revivalist in a Secular Age*. McLoughlin wrote:

Graham has become a spokesperson for a newly consolidated and articulate pietistic movement which is challenging the old Protestant church system. Theologically this movement is an amalgamation of the mellowing fundamentalism of the 1920s and the maturing Pentecostalism

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<sup>50</sup> Billy Graham, "Needed! Strong Men," *Hour of Decision Sermons*, no. 130 (Minneapolis: BGEA, 1960): 8.

<sup>51</sup> E. Stanley Jones, "Higher Synthesis?" *The Christian Century* (14 August 1957): 970.

<sup>52</sup> George Marsden, *Reforming Fundamentalism: Fuller Seminary and the New Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987).

of a much older date. Whether it is called the “new evangelicalism” or “neofundamentalism,” this theology represents a middle ground between the fanatical or ultra-fundamentalist fringe groups (Carl McIntire, Holly Rollers, faith healers, snake handlers) and the liberalism or modernism that is associated with major denominations.<sup>53</sup>

Similarly, Martin Marty wrote an article during Graham’s 1957 New York Crusade called, “Intruders in the Crowded Center.”<sup>54</sup> Marty wrote, “Ten competent scholars of the self-styled neo-evangelical school have now, for one instance, published a symposium which seeks to establish their group at dead center Christian theology.” Marty then concluded his comments about Graham’s middle road with,

The man [Graham] in the Christian center is, much like W. H. Auden’s “Double Man,” perched on the sharp arête where, if he does not move, he will fall; yet movement is heretical. The revolt of these immoderate moderates may yet tumble him, and we shall be diverted from the current ecumenical inquiries which would lead us all to be ever new in Christ. In such a diversion we would sow various seeds before we would – all of us – inherit the wind.<sup>55</sup>

Thus, according to Marty, Jones, and McLoughlin, by 1957 Graham was situated in the impossible middle, without the opportunity to move one way or the other. However,

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<sup>53</sup> McLoughlin, *Billy Graham: A Revivalist in a Secular Age*, 205.

<sup>54</sup> The article was actually a book review of *Contemporary Evangelical Thought* edited by Carl F. H. Henry.

<sup>55</sup> Martin Marty, “Intruders in a Crowded Center,” *Christian Century* (3 July 3, 1957) 820 and 821.

regardless of Graham's perception, he survived another fifty years as an evangelist straddling the middle road. In 1957, however, this was seen as an issue in itself because of the perception that Graham was refusing to commit himself to a particular theological side – either modernism or fundamentalism.

### **Graham Responds to the Movie, *Elmer Gantry***

Graham's 1960 sermon, "Moral Degeneracy" indicates that Graham listened to the ways in which he was attacked by the producers of the 1960 film *Elmer Gantry* as well, but in a steadfast, resolute way. As charges that his ministry was not on the "up-and-up" and he was shifting his message so that he could scam a larger number of congregants continued, Graham decided to cease his shift and to rest comfortably in the center. Entrenched in the center, Graham did not need to move any longer or even listen to his detractors. When rumors began to circulate that Hollywood producers decided to green light a script that director Richard Brooks had been trying to make for almost 15 years of Sinclair Lewis' spurious novel, *Elmer Gantry*, a new Graham with a new revivalism and an updated script decided to respond. The timing of the 1960 movie provides an interesting bookend to Graham's ministry. Up until this time, Graham refused to verbally acknowledge his detractors, choosing instead to take the high road. According to G. W. Target, if Graham had a response to early criticism, it had been to learn from his mistakes and improve his ability to deftly handle difficult situations.<sup>56</sup> So it was quite unusual when Graham chose to speak out against the

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<sup>56</sup> Target, 117.



movie and its producers in a 1961 sermon. This stance, while it could have been more vocal and action oriented, is in sharp contrast to Graham's earlier response to critics when he either said nothing, allowed his associates to respond for him, or veiled his response so adroitly that anyone would be hard pressed to find exactly to who or what he was responding to. Graham now rested comfortably in the theological middle with a following that was uniquely centrist. Couple this with a growing international incorporated ministry, Graham did not need to respond. Therefore, it appears that Graham must have felt very passionate to respond in-kind to media critics.

### **Exploring Brooks' and Lancaster's *Elmer Gantry***

To understand the full impact of the criticism, it is useful to explore the movie *Elmer Gantry* and the probable intentions of its producers. In 1960, Richard Brooks was a first tier director; with *Lord Jim*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, *The Blackboard Jungle*, and *The Professionals* among films to his credit, he was becoming a good Hollywood meal ticket. What brought Brooks most of his acclaim as a filmmaker and stirrer of evangelical ire, however, was his translation of Sinclair Lewis's novel, *Elmer Gantry*, onto the screen. In a July 1960 New York Times article, director Richard Brooks wrote that he first entertained the idea of writing a film adaptation of *Elmer Gantry* in 1945, when Lewis favorably reviewed Brooks' first novel, *The Brick Foxhole*, in *Esquire* magazine.<sup>57</sup> Brooks teamed up with Burt Lancaster who played the title character "Elmer Gantry" as well as served as co-Producer and although neither Brooks nor Lancaster acknowledged that

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<sup>57</sup> A.H. Weiler, "Screen: A Living, Action-Packed 'Elmer Gantry': Sinclair Lewis Story Arrives at Capitol Burt Lancaster Plays Role of Evangelist," *New York Times* (8 July 1960).

Billy Graham and his ministry provided impetus and example for their depiction, there is ample evidence to think that they were intentional in making their movie a study of Graham.<sup>58</sup>

Although the movie of *Elmer Gantry* stays somewhat close to the novel, it uses less than two-thirds of the book and ignores the final third of the book entirely. When the movie opens, Elmer Gantry is an unsuccessful traveling salesman punctuating his treks with spells of drinking and womanizing and lewd jokes. By chance Gantry stumbles upon a revivalist meeting where two things catch his eye: the first is the realization that there is money to be made and the second is the alluring but virginal Sister Sharon Falconer played by Jean Simmons. Teaming up with the revivalists, Elmer finds that, like Sister Sharon, he too has the power to transfix an audience and he revels in the theatrics of his new role. Gantry's "Fire and Brimstone" style speeches culminate in the soothing presence of Sister Sharon and the revivalists make great theatre; "love offerings" come piling in when the two team up.

Jean Simmons as Sharon Falconer, Gantry's surrogate mentor, depicts such purity that is quite surprising when it turns out that her actual name is Katie Jones. She admits that she has lied about most of her life, and actually grew up in abject poverty in Shantytown, which explains her affinity for the easy money. The audience, hoping that Sister Sharon's purity is real, is let down letting them know that not one of these preachers are, in fact, untainted. Nothing is as it seems in *Elmer Gantry* and Sister

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<sup>58</sup> The book was adapted into a play by Patrick Kearney and opened on Broadway on August 7, 1928 as well. There has even been an *Elmer Gantry* opera written and performed at Montclair State University and recently restaged for the Nashville Opera and positively reviewed by the *New York Times*.

Falconer, intoxicated with her own success, strangely begins to believe in her own divinity until finally seduced by the unchanged Gantry, again proving that all preachers, despite what they say or do have their weak spots.

Arthur Kennedy plays Jim Lefferts a newspaper reporter who agnostically follows the itinerant show. Kennedy's reporter is the foil for the boisterous Gantry and the two share clever theological arguments spoken with machine-gun rapidity, which remind audiences of Graham's similar cadence, especially in his early career (see Chapter 2, "Graham's Infamous Rise"). In fact, in his 1954 crusade in West Germany, German papers dubbed Graham as "God's Machine Gun."<sup>59</sup> One of these rapidly spoken argument ends with Gantry accusing Lefferts of being "Just like Mencken, Ingersoll, Sinclair Lewis and all the other atheists."

Elmer Gantry drew very respectable critical notices and earned nominations for five Academy Awards: Best Picture, Best Actor (Lancaster), Best Supporting Actress (Shirley Jones who played prostitute Lulu Baines), Best Screenplay (Brooks), and Best Scoring of a Dramatic or Comedy Picture (Andre Previn). The film eventually won three Oscars: Best Actor, Supporting Actress, and Screenplay. The film also garnered a 1960 Golden Globe for Best Actor and Lancaster was also voted best actor by the 1960 New York Film Critics Association.

Describing his screenplay, Brooks sarcastically quipped that Gantry "wants what everyone else is supposed to want - money, sex, and religion. He's the all-American

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<sup>59</sup> "Billy's Conquest," *Newsweek* (12 July 1954): 68.

boy.”<sup>60</sup> Brooks was fervent to bring Elmer Gantry to the screen since 1948; however, it was not until after he bought the rights to the novel, spent several years writing a script, worked ten years as an MGM contract director, and secured the cooperation of Burt Lancaster that Brooks was allowed to direct the film. Lancaster, who starred in Brooks’ 1948 screenplay of *Brute Force*, had the necessary star power to get the project approved and agreed to come aboard as long as he was guaranteed the title role and could serve as a co-producer. While filming *Brute Force*, Brooks boldly told Lancaster to read Lewis’s novel because someday he and Lancaster were going to make a movie out of it.<sup>61</sup> Lancaster was later quoted as saying, “Some parts you fall into like a glove. Elmer really wasn’t acting. It was me.”<sup>62</sup>

At the time Brooks and Lancaster were irresolute as to who their exemplar was for their main character. However, Kate Buford in *Burt Lancaster: An American Life* writes, “The director had amassed a collection of articles on the two key figures, Billy Sunday and Aimee Semple McPherson, of the great revivalist wave that swept across America in the teens and 1920s.” Buford then writes:

Billy Graham was the other model for Gantry, a fact carefully denied by the director and star. Several months after Lancaster’s anti-HUAC speech at the Commodore Hotel in January 1949, thirty-year-old William Franklin

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<sup>60</sup> Kate Buford, *Burt Lancaster: An American Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000) 205.

<sup>61</sup> Interestingly, Lewis had defended Brooks in 1946 when the U.S. Marine Corp threatened to sue Brooks over *The Brick Foxhole*, his book about a gay marine.

<sup>62</sup> Jonitas Klimpo, “Who is Burt Lancaster” *SquidWho* (2 October 2007) <<http://www.squidoo.com/burtlanaster>>.

Graham converted six thousand Californians under a huge canvas tent, exhorting them with fiery rhetoric to find the answers to their postwar fear in Jesus (a *Gantry* press release claimed the movie was shot in Los Angeles because the area had “spawned so many religious cults and sects that it seemed only fair”). In what became his great evangelistic “crusade” of the 1950s, during which sales of bibles reached an all-time high, Graham had a style markedly similar to Sunday and McPherson, only more mainstream and global. Brooks kept a file labeled “Billy Graham” stuffed with newspaper and magazine articles on which he pencil-marked the salient characteristics.<sup>63</sup>

*Elmer Gantry* was a very suggestive and contentious movie for the time, especially with Lulu Baines’ (Shirley Jones) line, “Oh, he gave me special instructions back of the pulpit Christmas Eve. He got to howlin’ ‘Repent! Repent!’ and I got to moanin’ ‘Save me! Save me!’ and the first thing I know he rammed the fear of God into me so fast I never heard my old man’s footsteps!” For some, the “mustiness of the printed page of 1927 is gone. This ‘Elmer Gantry’ makes the age and the people vividly come alive.”<sup>64</sup> Because of the suggestive nature and the subject matter, the production also drew criticism from morality groups, but praise from many others, including the Catholic Legion which liked the depiction of “fringe” revivalists. Some city newspaper advertisements ran with an “adults only” label and the film was banned entirely in

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<sup>63</sup> Buford, 200.

<sup>64</sup> Weiler.

Boston. The movie even had an opening explanatory prologue preventing anyone less than 16 years of age to view the film. *Variety* stated that the opening prologue restriction was “the first time that such an adults-only classification has been brought into play.”<sup>65</sup> The film begins with the following written statement:

We believe that certain aspects of Revivalism can bear examination – that the conduct of some revivalists makes a mockery of the traditional beliefs and practices of organized Christianity! We believe that everyone has a right to worship according to his conscience, but- Freedom of Religion is not license to abuse the faith of the people! However, due to the highly controversial nature of this film, we strongly urge you to prevent impressionable children from seeing it!<sup>66</sup>

This forewarning is not in the book and it seems that the movie producers wanted it known that they were not attacking one particular revivalist (Graham?), but all who make a “mockery” of the profession. Again, while no one can be sure that Brooks and Lancaster had the intent to target Graham, the mere fact that he was the nation’s leading revivalist, this notion cannot be overlooked. After the proclamation, the credits run followed by a close-up of the first page of the original novel.

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<sup>65</sup> Buford, 203.

<sup>66</sup> *Elmer Gantry*, Dir. Richard Brooks, Prod. Burt Lancaster, Perf. Burt Lancaster, Jean Simmons, Shirley Jones, Arthur Kennedy, and Dean Jagger, MGM, 1960.

### Character Elmer Gantry and Preacher Graham

There are many similarities between how Brooks depicts the persona of Gantry in connection with the biography of Graham. Some connections are not parallel, but simply because of their shaping, appear to link Gantry with Graham. Comparing the movie (which is much different than the novel) with Billy Graham is not difficult. First, like Gantry, Graham started as a door-to-door salesman. Roger Bruns writes:

When a friend offered a young Graham a job as a salesman for the Fuller Brush Company, a company that used door-to-door salesman, he leaped at the chance [...] Billy Graham took to sales like Brer Rabbit took to the briar patch – it was the place for him. All that indefatigable energy, that moxie and instinct for presenting the product, the aura in sincerity and purpose that crowds across the world would see in the future, were now being honed on Fuller Brush customers. He studied the catalogs to learn the facts about the brushes; he convinced himself that every house in his area of South Carolina needed more than one Fuller Brush; he perfected his sales pitch and tailored his spiel to suit various individuals [...] He learned to get his foot in the door and to close the sale before the door. He learned a great deal about communicating a message and connecting with a variety of people.<sup>67</sup>

Gantry's door-to-door salesman savvy is brought out in the film much more so than in the novel – in fact the biographical information present in the book mentions his

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<sup>67</sup> Bruns, 10.

salesman job three times, when the movie mentions this fact six times and opens with Graham being offered another salesman job by a drunken executive. Understandably the novel had different intentions, but again, the movie used less than two-thirds of the book's entirety. Although the book does not speak of the sales job outright more than three times, it does elude to his selling prowess many more times than that. This stark contrast could lead some to believe that the door-to-door salesman quality present in the early Billy Graham was a target for Brooks' screenplay through the salesman in Gantry. Additionally, one of the prescient denigrations of all evangelicals is their emphasis on heaven and nothing else, which makes many believe that evangelical targets are just future clients of a sales pitch with heaven being the cheap product. While this argument does make many cringe, perhaps Brooks' intention was to highlight this fact especially when Gantry's salesmanship is equated in the movie with his ability to motivate congregant-clients.

In the movie, after attending her prayer meeting, Gantry attempts to speak to the wildly popular preacher Sharon Falconer, and upon being politely turned away, manages to seduce one of her troupe, naïve Sister Rachel, into revealing information about Sharon with his slick salesman approach. Armed with this insider information, Gantry follows the company onto a train and after diverting Sharon's protective manager, William L. Morgan, Gantry sneaks next to Sister Sharon and claims to know her. The exhausted Sister Sharon is wary of Gantry but is won over by his coarseness and charm, seeing him as a diamond in the rough, and agrees to meet him the next day



at her personal tent. Gantry always seems to have the argument that dissuades the other – an apologist with a salesman’s tie.

Gantry is present the next day to witness Sister Sharon convince the Lincoln police that not only is their gathering tent not a fire hazard, but the city leaders need to oppose the attempts by local “whiskey slingers” to discredit her, a sales pitch that is purposefully reminiscent of Gantry’s earlier attempts to sell himself to everyone he meets. Gantry, thoroughly impressed, tries to seduce Sister Sharon into hiring him, but when he realizes that he cannot dupe her, informs her, with only partial sincerity, that he wants to inspire sinners with his own tale of moral redemption. Sister Sharon allows him to speak. The whole company watches with awe as Gantry galvanizes the audience with his theatrical preaching about love, hellfire and deliverance. His product: heaven; the sales pitch: everyone is entitled. These are themes reminiscent in more than one Graham sermon.

That night, Gantry attempts to kiss Sister Sharon, prompting her to warn him that she is a true believer who will allow him to remain with the troupe only if he gives up drinking, smoking and carousing. Lefferts, who has overheard them, laughingly tells Gantry he could be “the most successful clown in the circus.” Leffert’s words prove true, as Gantry brings his salesmanship to Sharon’s ministry. As she preaches kindness and faith, he stirs audiences to speak in tongues and beg forgiveness. For this, Sister Sharon’s manager urges her to fire Gantry, but she believes them a good pair, and is further convinced when they are invited to perform in Zenith, the biggest city in the region (Graham’s Los Angeles?). They meet with the Zenith church leaders, brought

together by realtor George Babbitt. When many of the local ministers express consternation at religion spiraling into spectacle, Babbitt and Gantry counter that churches must earn money to continue their ministry, and Sister Sharon's visits convert hundreds. Although the committee eventually agrees, many of the ministers remain concerned. This aspect is definitely reminiscent of Graham's denials to preach in London during his original 1948 campaign there as well as his 1949 Los Angeles crusade that eventually launched his success. The revival enters Zenith with huge fanfare, orchestrated by Gantry, and soon the rapidly growing ministry is running like a corporation turning out believers like Model T's. Graham's incorporation after his "crisis" in 1948 gives another clue of the parallelism with Graham. In fact, Lewis' novel, while similar to the movie in that both share the fact that after Sister Sharon and Gantry team up money pours in, does not have the corporation feel. Lewis writes more of the magic of the teaming of Sister Sharon and Gantry; Brooks' screenplay has two scenes in particular that seem like an assembly line. For instance, when the team is getting ready for Zenith, there is the typical fast-paced part with various scenes with heavy underscore depicting the set up the tent, preparing the serving plates, getting dressed, etc. This gives the movie more of a feel that the teaming of Sister Sharon and Gantry forms a well-oiled machine - not that their teaming is serendipitous.

About half way into the movie, the reporter, Jim Lefferts, who has been following Sister Sharon and Gantry, prints a negative article; the movie overdubs the article while showing "typical" Americans reading it. Lefferts says (which turns into voice-over),

What qualifies someone to be a revivalist? Nothing, nothing at all. There is not one law in any state in the Union protecting the public from the hysterical onslaught of revivalists. But the law does permit them to invest in tax-free Property, and collect money, without accounting for how it is used. What do you get for your money? Can you get into heaven by contributing one buck or can you get life eternal by shaking hands for Jesus with Elmer Gantry?

The movie then shifts inside the Lulu Baines' house of prostitution as one of the unnamed prostitutes continues to read the article:

Continued on page three. So...I watched this unholy trinity - Falconer, Gantry, Morgan - save Nebraska. Has sin in that state been washed away? Is there less envy, lust or adultery? [...] To Elmer Gantry, God is an all-American football player with a long white beard, who carries lightning in one hand, and a bag of tricks in the other. And Gantry has the high-pressure style and personality to sell this God even to big-city slickers. He can make innocent people feel guilty, and bad people feel good. Gantry has a voice made for promises.

Again, while these lessons are taught by Lewis sporadically in the novel, Brooks has diligently spliced together these disparate situations into one carefully arranged scene with a more pointed implication. This statement in whole is nowhere to be found in the novel. At another point in the movie, after Lefferts has published his article and Gantry and Sister Sharon are forced to defend themselves, they confront Lefferts.

LEFFERTS. Are you ordained?

SISTER SHARON. What?

LEFFERTS. Do you hold a degree from any recognized theological seminary? Does Gantry?

SISTER SHARON. No.

LEFFERTS. Are you sanctioned to preach by any church?

SISTER SHARON. No, Mr. Lefferts, but...neither was Peter or Paul or any of the other apostles.

LEFFERTS. Ah, but they said that they lived with the Son of God, were taught by him, were sanctified by him. What gives you the right to speak for God?

SISTER SHARON. I couldn't possibly be doing God's work without his approval.

LEFFERTS. How did you get his approval? Did God speak to you personally? Did he send you a letter? Did you have a visitation from God? A burning bush, perhaps? Where in the New Testament does it say that God spoke to anyone except his son?

Needless to say, although Graham attended Florida Bible Institute and graduated with an anthropology degree from Wheaton College, the same implications of not being trained to share the Gospel were thrown Graham's way continually. The novel does not have this conversation between Lefferts and Gantry, again pointing to Brooks'

screenplay as trying to serve different means and the Gantry of the novel, actually is an ordained minister.

### **Changing the Script**

Most authors, after selling their novels to Hollywood, complain when their work is altered and, in many cases, distorted by filmmakers. Writes A.H. Weiler, the New York Times reviewer in 1960:

Mr. Brooks, an obviously dedicated artisan who has owned the property [rights to the novel *Elmer Gantry*] for some five years and shaped the script over the past two years, has made astounding but effective changes in the original. Many of the characters are gone, some have been changed completely, scenes have been shifted and emphasis on other principals has been raised or lowered. But Gantry and his company emerge, in essence, in bold, rough, sacrilegious but nearly always human, believable terms.

The Gantry we see now is not ordained, Baptist, Methodist or any other sect, but an expert spieler and a lusty, ribald drummer who sees a good thing in Sister Sharon Falconer's evangelical troupe and cons his way into her tent-tabernacle, her graces and her heart. And, in focusing only on this period in Gantry's peripatetic career. Mr. Brooks has given point and action to the sprawling, contentious work that was the novel.

By the time *Elmer Gantry* reached the screen in 1960, Lewis was deceased, so he never weighed in with his assessment of the actual production. However, after reading

many of Brooks' early drafts, Sinclair Lewis did not complain that Brooks had retooled his *Elmer Gantry* for the screen. Lewis even advised Brooks to read criticisms of his book and use them to make improvements. Lewis believed that his version of the title character was more caricature than flesh and blood human being. It is possible that Brooks took Lewis' advice and altered the Gantry character and it is my postulation that Brooks did so by taking a living "Elmer Gantry" in Billy Graham, and used him as model for his fiction. This retooling based on a living model prompted Graham to respond directly to the movie in a sermon, something he had not done before, at least not in a recorded discourse. Based on Brooks' own recollections and Kate Buford's biography of Burt Lancaster, it is known that Brooks also used Billy Sunday and Aimee Semple McPherson as examples for his interpretation. Nevertheless, the image of Graham and the style in which he preached before 1955 are too close to Lancaster's caricature to be mistaken. Lancaster went so far as to use Graham's front forward stance while preaching, his finger pointed with bible open, and the darkened eyes, all which point to a symbiosis with the young Graham. McPherson must have been a model for Sister Sharon Falconer and Sunday an example for Gantry's acrobatic proselytizing, but the ability to watch and copy a living Billy Graham had to be too much temptation not to use.

Still, there are many other differences between the movie and book. For instance, in Lewis' novel Gantry is an animated, womanizing, and habitually drunk divinity student who is stripped of his ministry after seducing a deacon's daughter (the prostitute Lulu Baines – but this episode is played very differently in the movie). Also,

while Gantry's stint as a preacher in Sister Sharon traveling "circus" is one episode appearing midway through the novel, the film concerns itself with little else. In the novel, Gantry is a shameless hypocrite who finds evangelism to be a channel for his energetic personality and massive ego. As reinterpreted by Brooks and Lancaster, Gantry still exhibits a weakness for whisky and women but is essentially an upright, sincere man who believes what he preaches even when he does not practice it. At the conclusion of the movie, after a fire has killed Sister Sharon and destroyed her new temple, Gantry's old persona seems to have died as well, replaced with someone who realizes that he has barely escaped hell's flames and now walks in the light of eternal salvation. In Lewis' novel, though, this is not the ending at all. For Lewis, Elmer recovers from the grief of Sister Sharon's death (whom he truly loved), turns his oratory skills to motivational speaking, and soon returns to evangelism with even greater success than before. Despite all of this, Elmer soon returns to the same skirt-chasing egomaniac he was when introduced in the first chapter.

The most interesting changes employed by Brooks' screenplay concerns the characters of Jim Lefferts and Lulu Baines. In the novel, Lefferts is Elmer's fellow student at divinity school. While both pretend spiritual matters don't matter, Lefferts does so with more intelligence, having familiarized himself with such concepts as evolution which the simpler Gantry cannot grasp. In his film, Brooks recasts Lefferts as the cynical newspaperman who reports that the revival meetings attendees are more about fabrication and deceit than Jesus' salvation. Lulu Baines gets a similar revamping. Instead of the deacon's daughter whom Elmer seduced and is pressured

into marrying, for Brooks, she is Gantry's former girlfriend who turned to prostitution, but remains bitter at having been dumped by Gantry. Her life is now ridiculously hopeless because of her deflowering by the hands of Gantry.

### **Graham Responds to the Movie, *Elmer Gantry***

To all these comparisons and publicity garnered by the Academy Award winning movie, Graham had very little to say openly except an explicitly sharp sermon in 1961. It was an interesting year for Graham and his Association. Having recently returned from conferences in Europe and back-to-back crusades in Africa and the Middle East, Graham took a short respite in 1961 before taking on Chicago and South America in 1962. The movie *Elmer Gantry* had been released the previous July, but was still playing in theatres during 1961, especially since it was such a great box office draw and had procured five Oscar nominations (as was customary of such pictures, they were often re-released throughout the country to capitalize on the new hype). During this time, however, Graham filled up his time with meetings and was a guest of President Kennedy at the White House and on the golf course<sup>68</sup> and it is not known if he ever saw the movie before he sermonized about it that year.

Known primarily for his uncomplicated "milk" sermons, it was uncommon for Graham to preach with very much meat or specific attacks on people or places. Even when he preached against Communism, it was rare to hear Graham mention the "Soviet Union." Reinhold Niebuhr called Graham's gospel "simplistic and blind, a

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<sup>68</sup> Graham, *Just As I Am*, 389-402.



menace more than salvation, heaven on a discount card.”<sup>69</sup> So it was somewhat strange that Graham attacked Hollywood with such vitriol in his sermon entitled, “Moral Impurity” (the sermon would go into print with the title “Moral Degeneracy”) on May 21, 1961 during his weekly “Hour of Decision” address.

During the broadcast the “Hour of Decision” Choir sang “Jesus Thy Blood and Righteousness,” “Under His Wings,” and “Softly and Tenderly.” Bev Shea sang “There is no Name so Sweet” and the scripture came from the entirety of Romans 1. Based on extensive research, culling through the “Hour of Decision” records, it is interesting to note that, with the exception of Shea’s song “There is no Name so Sweet,” this was the only time until 1980 that the other songs and scripture would be used, some 20 years and 800 broadcasts later. To be fair, hymns and scripture were infrequently repeated, perhaps once per year would hymns be duplicated and scripture was repeated only when sermons were repeated (usually with subtle changes as alluded to previously in the chapter), but this broadcast seemed to be something special, so using unique hymns, scripture, and sermon seemed to be the order for the day. With lyrics such as: “Jesus, Thy blood and righteousness; My beauty are, my glorious dress; ‘Midst flaming worlds, in these arrayed, With joy shall I lift up my head” (Jesus Thy Blood and Righteousness), it was clear that this was a well coordinated event to make a serious point.

Graham started his sermon discussing recent graduations from high schools and colleges (as May was prime time for this) and the unnecessary partying that had

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<sup>69</sup> Paul Hendrickson, “Prayer and Pride and the Call to the Crusade,” *Washington Post* (19 October 1986).

“recently” began to be the norm. Graham then directly equated the “immorality of the nation” with what was produced by Hollywood movie makers. Carefully distancing himself from any notion that he himself viewed any of these movies, he paraphrased Earl Wilson, Hollywood gossip columnist, who “rebuked Hollywood for giving its Oscars this year to people who played immoral roles. The Oscar for the best actress went to a woman who played a prostitute, and the Oscar for the best actor went to a man who played an immoral revivalist of the latter 19<sup>th</sup> century.”<sup>70</sup> Interestingly, a few months earlier, in January, while visiting and playing golf with President-elect Kennedy in Palm Beach, Florida, Graham accompanied the Kennedy’s to a private party full of “socialites who wintered in Palm Beach” including some Hollywood insiders.<sup>71</sup> Graham must have felt strongly enough so as to not worry about offending any of his new friends from Florida.

Graham continued his sermon by saying, “The motion picture industry is now under heavy fire from its friends because of its moral degradation in recent months. In order to make money, this industry seems to have outdone itself to demonstrate how low the human mind can sink.” Again, heavy words levied towards a singular entity -- the likes of which Graham was not known to do, except previous to his rise to national prominence and towards Communism. So, although this is not without precedent,

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<sup>70</sup> Billy Graham, “Moral Degeneracy,” *Hour of Decision* (BGEA, Minneapolis, MN, 21 May 1961) 1.

<sup>71</sup> Graham, *Just As I Am*, 396-97.

Graham seems to have taken off his gloves in retaliation toward the “degradation in recent months.”<sup>72</sup>

After quoting Romans 1:28-32,<sup>73</sup> Graham said, “This type of film shown abroad is completely misrepresenting the American life. We spend a great deal of time and money trying to give people abroad a true picture of our country. This picture is wiped out in one day by one of these motion pictures.”<sup>74</sup> Again, it is quite peculiar that Graham took the time to single out one movie. Usually Graham would speak in code or make sweeping generalizations, and although Graham would go on in this message to do just that, these barbs are quite particular, even quoting *Time Magazine’s* review: “Having demonstrated the various advantages of adultery, the film goes on to make it clear to the movie audience that sexual dalliance [...] is really quite all right.”<sup>75</sup> After citing a few more films in the genre of moral degradation (but without the same resentment or detailed description), including *Where the Boys Are* and Federico Fellini’s *La Dolce Vita*,<sup>76</sup> Graham then went into his more trademarked broad appeal: “These pictures could not have been shown on our screens even five years ago. We are in the

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<sup>72</sup> Graham, “Moral Degeneracy,” 2.

<sup>73</sup> Romans 1:28-32 (NIV), <sup>28</sup>Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done. <sup>29</sup>They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, <sup>30</sup>slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; <sup>31</sup>they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless. <sup>32</sup>Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them.

<sup>74</sup> Graham, “Moral Degeneracy,” 3.

<sup>75</sup> Graham, “Moral Degeneracy,” 4.

<sup>76</sup> *La Dolce Vita* was also an Academy Award nominee for Best Picture.

midst of a moral revolution that is going to destroy American long before Communist Rockets [quite a statement for someone who became famous for the “rockets” he shot at Communism], unless there is a complete reversal of that trend.”<sup>77</sup>

After five pages of printed sermon about movies and the film industry, Graham attacks modern literature and the lackadaisical church and church leaders, but without the exacting language, culminating in “Those thousands who are engaged in selling sex to America, whether by film or pornographic literature, are already doomed to destruction **unless they repent of their sins.**”<sup>78</sup> This is one of two times when Graham or his editors chose to use emboldened type in this sermon. The second instance of bold type is found when, exemplifying his newly found “social” or corporate sin, Graham concludes with “When **you** repent, when **you** turn to Christ, it is the nation repenting and the nation through **you** turning to Christ for forgiveness. Let his blood cleanse you from your sins and give you a new power to overcome the temptation of tomorrow.”<sup>79</sup> Here we find a blending of his ecumenical stance towards social sin and a clear and personal attack on a particular movie and its producers.

### **Graham’s Script Concluded**

For a long time, Billy Graham resisted thinking of himself as an evangelist, evoking in his mind too many images of *Elmer Gantry*.<sup>80</sup> And while Graham has never

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<sup>77</sup> Graham, “Moral Degeneracy,” 5.

<sup>78</sup> Graham, “Moral Degeneracy,” 8.

<sup>79</sup> Graham, “Moral Degeneracy,” 10.

<sup>80</sup> Hendrickson, A19.

acknowledged if he actually viewed the film, according to Roger Bruns biography and ample circumstantial evidence he read the novel in 1948 to prepare to defend his ministry. After the movie came out, Graham's ministry was sufficiently entrenched that he could be more pointed in his attacks; after all, his centrist views were already assured and supported. While the Brooks and Lancaster had the intent of conflating Graham with Gantry, Graham would not take the bait and give the comparison credence, a far cry from the more immature, pre-1948 Graham who might have moved or changed critical aspects of his ministry. From 1960 and onwards, Graham's ministry did little to change, but only built on successes that were manufactured during the previous decade. From 1950 to 1960, Graham had taken the criticisms from all sides, took what he needed, changed his script accordingly, and found such a comfortable middle ground that the need to continue shifting was displaced by his confidence in himself and his ministry. In all fairness, there are parts of Graham's theology that remained unchanged throughout his ministry, particularly his preaching of the cross and resurrection. In *Safari for Souls with Billy Graham in Africa* (1960), Graham is quoted as saying, "One last word: Be sure of the Gospel you preach! I say this is the Word of God. How do I know? I have accepted it by faith! [...] In your preaching, major on two things. Preach the Cross of Christ...And major on the resurrection."<sup>81</sup> He had achieved a simple, playable script, complete with a protagonist, antagonist, and a well-developed

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<sup>81</sup> Tom McMahan, *Safari for Souls with Billy Graham in Africa* (Columbia, S.C.: The State-Record Company, 1960) 106-108.

story. All he needed was to complete his chronicle, which he continued to do, well into his 90s.

## Chapter Four

### “Lights...Camera...Graham”

Whenever a Christian group approaches the arena of public relations, advertising, mass communication of the gospel, and anything remotely performance oriented, it faces hazards. With these perils, however, also come opportunities... perhaps. There is danger of being labeled the huckster, the big-time promoter, the hard-selling salesman which the Christian faith detests, its true believers despise, and the unbelievers and unchurched abhor and use as ammunition against these Christian “elitists.” Yet the advent of printing brought the opportunities of reaching far beyond the sound of the voice. Today the communication miracle is international. Evangelists such as Billy Graham might say: to not take and use these created gifts from God revealed in the ingenuity of human beings, would be less than Christian.

Graham became the preeminent representative of the Christian world community by coupling his natural preaching skills to the arrival of these “exotic” forms and new means of communication. The tabloids, the vast networks of radio and television, the billboards, movies and film, all combine to reveal a Christian dynamic, a gospel appeal to a society saturated by secular ambitions that future evangelists would employ, partly based on Graham’s successful use of them. Again, in the words of the evangelists who use these means – not to do so would go against God’s intentions. Furthermore, if these means makes a star of the evangelist, so be it – more might come hear the message if they think they might get a chance to see an evangelizing luminary.

Graham argued that the ambition for fame had to somehow belong to God as well “because it allowed him to reach more people, spread the gospel farther.”<sup>1</sup>

One thing is certain: “Graham and company” became media masters and capitalized on these new forms. Radio launched Graham as a media star and it remained his best outlet for some fifty years, mainly because he was heard by so many so often over the airwaves. But, for those who did not have a radio, they could ponder his words in his daily syndicated newspaper column, *My Answer*; or they could receive his magazine, *Decision* (which still circulates in the millions), or see his imprint on *Christianity Today* which he co-founded with Carl Henry in 1955. Once they were able to hear or, better yet, see Graham, the feeling that he was already a part of the family was undoubtedly present. Then there are the short-lived television broadcasts of the weekly “Hour of Decision,” crusades and their quarterly broadcast on ABC, and films from the BGEA (more recently, videos and DVDs, the internet and other forms of new media as well). Some would argue that using these forms for mass conversion is against the relational aspect of Christianity. After all, can people really be converted if they are on the receiving end of a microphone? Somehow, however, they have worked, mostly due to the time-tested meticulous formula of planning, high theatre, and intense follow-up. Furthermore, by changing his stage performance techniques over the years as these media forms evolved, Graham was able to steadily increase his luster. To be fair, just as it takes many unseen people to stage a theatrical production, opera, political

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<sup>1</sup> Nancy Gibbs and Michael Duffy, *The Preacher to the Presidents: Billy Graham in the White House* (New York: Center Street, 2007) 50.



rally, or sporting event, so to with a Billy Graham Crusade and at the center of these events was the developing matinee idol. This chapter explores the rising stage star of Billy Graham, the way his Association used radio, and how television and film changed their approaches and Graham's techniques of media evangelism.

### **Why Billy Graham?**

Billy Graham has benefited from unsurpassed popularity, but neither his neo-fundamentalist theology nor his ability to cross political boundaries adequately account for his ability to stay in the public eye for almost sixty years. It is the combination of his theological and social message as well as the channels through which he conveys messages that has made him very influential and venerable. The ways in which Graham invoked revivalism derives first and foremost from his personality and delivery, both in vocal tone and physicality from the use of voice and body. Equally important are the nature of the appeals and motivations for action that he continued to stress throughout his long career. Through intense rehearsal and channeling his talents in radio and television, Graham pushed through the "Elmer Gantry" labeling that was so present in his past.

Graham had those rare qualities of personality and rhetorical talent which have made him an attractive and compelling figure on the platform -- a man with whom audiences feel not only a bond of sympathy and affection, but also a man whom they admire and respect almost universally. His messages were timely, but it was the way he delivered his message as well as the frequency with which he was heard that established the rapport that evolved into the essence of mid-20<sup>th</sup> century revival

preaching. To the armchair psychologist, Graham's power rested in the fact that his audiences were eager to accept his message of hope and reassurance. Additionally, Graham came along at a time when Americans were frightened, floundering, and desperate for something to cling to. Two world wars and a great depression had destroyed their bright illusion that humans by their own virtues could create the kingdom of God on earth and that America was God's chosen land.

Graham has also had the rare ability to change his tactics midstream so as to make sure his audiences could get the most out of his messages. Before 1950, Graham's style "was at its most flamboyant, not just the radiant ties and lively socks, but an equally flashy preaching style that appealed to ever larger crowds."<sup>2</sup> With the advent of television, however, Graham was pressured (self-pressured to be sure) to change the way in which he "performed" his message. Graham and his associates knew that home audiences would no longer be able to follow along with the bombastic, "theatrical" preacher; Graham had to move to television and the movies and with it, a new acting style.

At barely 31 years of age in 1950, he was already nationally famous (Billy Sunday, by comparison was almost 52 when he became nationally famous). Handsome to a fault with piercing blue eyes, tall and blonde, friendly, ingenuous, and open, so many evaluators, interviewers, acquaintances, and friends have already established his likeability. These same people attest that success has not marred his charm and

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<sup>2</sup> Gibbs and Duffy, 14-15.

demeanor, only adding greatly to his poise, charisma, and maturity. Furthermore, because of his burning passion to preach, there is no doubt that he felt that his calling was true, but his relaxed cordiality off the platform disappeared when he stepped into the spotlighted pulpit. Insiders such as Stanley High, William McLoughlin, and Roger Bruns describe how before preaching, Graham would become taut and alert, but this nervousness would quickly be read as something other than tension, communicating an easy confidence to his congregants.

### **Graham's Use of Voice**

When listeners hear Graham live early in his career, like his inaugural presentation during his 1949 Los Angeles Crusade taken as a Newsreel,<sup>3</sup> one cannot help note that Graham seemed to have modeled his oratory on the highly individualized style of Walter Winchell. Soon after, however, Graham found his own personal style with a delivery more suited to his personality. His dominant oration characteristic was a rapid, staccato manner in which he exclaims his short, simple sentences. He spoke with a strident urgency of a messenger at a catastrophe, like a witness being interviewed by a reporter at a weather emergency. Like a trained actor, Graham supposedly endeavored to keep his powerful voice in shape. When he and T. W. Wilson would drive alone, Graham would "lubricate his vocal cords by booming, 'YES! YES! YES! NO! NO! NO!'" Wilson jokingly threatened to sue Graham for deafening him. (Strangely, Graham also would exercise his eyes by rolling them, so as

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<sup>3</sup> The entire Newsreel is located on YouTube:  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CUDKehwFWjg>

to stave off the inevitable weakening of his eyes lest he would have to wear glasses and ruin his movie-star image).<sup>4</sup>

Though Graham carefully scripted his messages and kept an outline of his sermon on his lectern, it is readily apparent that he rarely looked down at his lines, as if he had memorized his dramatic monologue. Sure of what he was about to say, he was not merely making it up or adlibbing. His Carolina accent, though definitely noticeable in pronunciation, does not impede the swift torrent of his hurried delivery. After all these years, even when watching an old broadcast of a Billy Graham crusade, it is easy to see that the slick presentation is akin to high drama. The sounds alone are entertaining, varied, and never dull. Some syllables are staccato; others curl up and dance around until he reaches a higher pitch for a lofty emotional appeal. Then, very suddenly, Graham is back to his story-telling, living-room tone.

When he speaks there is a trace of Southern Aristocrat in his voice. For instance, "Honolulu" is "Honlulah"; "remember" is "remembah"; and "dollar" is "dollah." He did not drawl, but would bark at his crowd like a drill sergeant of sorts. Even his doctrinal sermons on love and grace (see "The Love of God") were delivered in a high-pitched, stomach-tightening tone, which seemed more like a tongue-lashing than a sermon. As Graham once described his own feelings while he preached, "I felt as though I had a rapier in my hand and, through the power of the Bible, was slashing

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<sup>4</sup> Bishop, 22.

deeply into men's consciences, leading them to surrender to God."<sup>5</sup> It was a slashing which left few listeners unscathed, or at least unprovoked.

Graham's voice has been a great asset to him; it is clear, well articulated, colored by his North Carolina accent, and clearly penetrating. During the early 1950s, Graham manifested great variety in vocal range, his pitch varying suitably with his subject matter. He adjusted the volume of his voice to the size of the performance space and had a dramatic and intense gaze, but his emotion appeared to be internally motivated and not manufactured, like a Method Actor drawing on past experiences to help him find the emotional range. At times his rate seemed somewhat pushed, but his emotion never did. He spoke easily and freely, using a great deal of humor as well as pathos.

Despite his folksy language, his printed sermons convey little of the conviction with which they are delivered. Some of them show interesting ideas, but neither deep thinking nor linguistic novelty characterized Graham's preaching. Since his messages basically centered in the simple declaration of the gospel facts and an invitation to the Christian faith, many of his sermons seem alike. Suffice it to say, Billy Graham is more an oral communicator than a written one, an actor whose attributes lend clearly to the evangelical stage. He used a natural, direct language and, like those preachers who provided the most influence on Graham (Whitefield, Moody to a certain extent, Finney, and Sunday), his sermons were not primarily literary products.

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<sup>5</sup> Billy Graham, *Christianity Today* (16 October 1956): 6.

## Graham's Use of Body

The almost strident quality of his voice together with his forceful hand gestures, like the blast from a bugle, prompted one reporter of Houston's 1952 crusade to write: "He repeatedly banged his fists on the pulpit, clenched them in symbolic anguish against his temples, and swept the huge stadium with a punctuating forefinger."<sup>6</sup> Even Charlton Heston, who received the 10 Commandments from God himself, might be upstaged by this 20<sup>th</sup> century Moses. On any video of Billy Graham's early sermons, throughout much of the address, he holds a limp Bible in one hand, slapping it as he quotes one text then another, lifting it high as he shouts "Billy Graham doesn't say it; the Bible says it," or "The Bible says...", brandishing the book like his self-described rapier fighting away all uncertainty.

In 1953's Dallas campaign, "he paced the boards and beat on his chest" as he barked at his audience and when he got too hot, he took off his coat without breaking his flow of words and preached the remainder of the sermon in short sleeves.<sup>7</sup> Graham would stride back and forth across his platform as he talked, and like Billy Sunday before him, he would walk a mile during each sermon. While he spoke, Cliff Barrows (Graham's longtime "Master of Ceremonies") would sit behind him on the platform and carefully play out or pull in the cord which ran from Graham's lapel microphone. One wondered who was getting the most exercise – Graham's legs or Barrow's arms.

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<sup>6</sup> *Houston Post* (2 June 1952) 1.

<sup>7</sup> *Dallas Morning News* (3 June, 1953) 1, sec. 3.

When Graham first started, however, he was far from the preacher he would become. Graham's preaching performance was one of the major aspects of change, occurring in just a few years from an insecure, flashy showman, to a seemingly more mature evangelist. Graham's confidence and authoritative manner have been noted so frequently by those who have commented on his effectiveness, that it is hard to imagine that his first sermon was marked by a great deal of insecurity. On Easter Sunday in 1937, Graham preached his first sermon in a country church in Bostick, Florida. Without previous warning he was asked to deliver a sermon to a small congregation of twenty-five people. Graham's entire stock of sermons consisted of four outlines lifted from the themes of Lee Scarborough, professor of evangelism at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. Each sermon was planned to last forty-five minutes, but under the pressure of the moment, Graham worked through all four of his sermons in approximately eight minutes. In a 1964 *McCall's* article, Graham remembered his first sermon: "As I began my knees shook and my hands and brow became wet. I raced through my first sermon outline, then the second, then the third. At the end of eight minutes I had been through all four sermons. I sat down. Nobody ever failed more ignominiously. The experience convinced me I was not called to preach."<sup>8</sup>

Despite this setback, Graham continued to ask God if He wanted to use the young Graham. Needless to say, Graham returned to his "call." Graham's rapid rate of delivery has caused him embarrassment on more than one occasion, however.

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<sup>8</sup> Billy Graham, "Billy Graham's Own Story, God is My Witness, Part I." *McCall's* (April 1964) 201.

Commenting on a traffic safety record, he referred to the “one hundred fifty days without *fertility*.”<sup>9</sup> In attempting to say “hail fellow well met,” Graham’s eloquence faded as he said, “hell wet male fellow,” then “male het well fella,” and then “whale het male fella.” He finally managed, “Shucks, you folks know what I’m trying to say.”<sup>10</sup>

Throughout the 1950s, Graham learned to speak much more slowly than before; his recorded messages give this plain evidence.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, Graham modified his gestures. Early in his preaching, one observer recorded twenty-one gestures in the space of little more than a minute, “arms flailing, arms folded, arms akimbo, fists clenched, palms opened, slapping the bible, the pulpit, the platform railing, finger pointing to Heaven, to Hell, at you [...]”<sup>12</sup> Graham eventually changed from his Billy Sunday-inspired style to one of standing quietly and using few gestures, except his trademarked pointed finger shooting up to the sky and out towards the congregants. He occasionally still used broad gestures, even when he preached in New York City in 2001, one of his last preaching engagements, but they were always in keeping with the size of the crowds he addressed.

The drama of Graham’s delivery was heightened by the way he acted out his words as well. As he would retell an old Biblical story, he would actually imitate their

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<sup>9</sup> Alan Levy, *God Bless You Real Good* (New York: An Essandess Special Edition, 1967) 5.

<sup>10</sup> Levy, 5.

<sup>11</sup> For instance, compare the 1949 Los Angeles campaign with the 1957 New York Crusade. LA: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CUDKehwFWjg&feature=related>. New York: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_HDqo2p3nPU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_HDqo2p3nPU)

<sup>12</sup> High, 90.



voices, assumed their postures, crouching down as they might to pick up an errant possession. He would even portray the motions of animals in the stories. One reporter described Graham in 1952, "If he describes a bucking bronco, as he did the night I was there, Graham bobs up and down like a man trying desperately to stay in the saddle [...] He darts from side to side, from back to front [of the platform]." <sup>13</sup>

### **Graham's Use of Humor and Shock Techniques**

His talents do not end with drama, however, as he often showed his comedic timing as well. "He demonstrates his impression of a pig prancing in the limelight" one night to illustrate the point that even if you gave a pig a bath, "gave it a Toni, and sprinkled it with Chanel number five," it would still, like an unregenerate sinner, revert to the mud puddle as soon as you let it loose.<sup>14</sup> "Billy Graham had the audience in stitches of laughter last night," according to one report, when he described the foibles of modern marriage and mimicked the tones of the complaining wife and the bored husband.<sup>15</sup>

He would frequently intersperse jokes in his sermons to relieve the tension built up by his hammering on fear, guilt, and judgment. "When asked by her minister if she knew what was in the Bible, one little girl proudly replied that she knew everything that was in it, and proceeded to list 'the picture of her sister's boy friend, the recipe for mother's favorite hand lotion, a lock of baby brother's hair, and the ticket for Pa's

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<sup>13</sup> *Washington Post* (3 February 1952) 13-M.

<sup>14</sup> *Pittsburgh Press* (18 September 1952) 2.

<sup>15</sup> *Columbia State* (25 February 1950) 1.

watch.”<sup>16</sup> In one of his sermons on the teenage “problem,” he said, “The old-fashioned motto of old was: ‘What is a home without a mother?’ Now a more appropriate one would be: ‘What is a home without a canopener?’”<sup>17</sup> He remarked in his sermon on adultery and divorce that “Our young people today know far more about the statistics of Brigitte Bardot than they do about the Seventh Commandment.”<sup>18</sup>

On one live radio address in 1956, audible laughter can be heard when Graham told the story of a lady who said her minister, “‘This morning I stood in front of the mirror for half an hour admiring my beauty. Do you think I committed the sin of pride?’ The minister replied, ‘No, I don’t think you committed the sin of pride. It was more the sin of a faulty imagination.’”<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, he was even willing to inject humor into his invitations to come forward and accept Christ: “Father, Mother, with grey hairs and bifocals and bunions and bulges, have you given yourself to Christ?”<sup>20</sup>

Graham has also been a master of using shock techniques in his oratory. According to one report, he told an audience in New Orleans that the only cure for swearing was to “Wash your mouth out with the blood of Christ and nail your tongue

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<sup>16</sup> William F. Graham, *Peace with God* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1953) 25.

<sup>17</sup> Billy Graham, “Our Teen-Age Problem,” *Hour of Decision* radio address, no. 17 (14 June 1955).

<sup>18</sup> *Charlotte Observer* (26 September 1958) 4-B.

<sup>19</sup> Billy Graham, “The Rivers of Damascus,” *Hour of Decision* radio address, no. 41 (23 February 1956).

<sup>20</sup> *Charlotte Observer* (24 September 1958) 8-A.

to the Cross.”<sup>21</sup> He warned young people that God knew all about “that sin you committed last night in a parked automobile.”<sup>22</sup> With his usual vividness he once portrayed in detail various crimes of abuse, including “horse-whipping young girls,” “pouring gasoline over an old man and setting him on fire just to see him burn,” torturing “younger children for hours in a secluded place and then [forcing] them to participate in perversions.”<sup>23</sup> He also told of wartime atrocities in which “Soldiers are reported to have severed ears from prisoners, tied live grenades to screaming prisoners, poured gasoline over the bodies of wounded men and ignited the human torches.”<sup>24</sup> As a possible scare tactic and anti-Communist rhetoric, Graham declared that during the Hungarian revolt, rape was so common in Russian-ruled Hungary that no woman from ten to seventy escaped it.<sup>25</sup>

The purpose of these shocking remarks is to point out the sinfulness of mankind and to push people to turn from sin in revulsion. The rhetorical device would be similar to a playwright’s use of emotional tension which seeks identification, confession, leading to repentance, and forgiveness. Perhaps Graham reasoned that suppressed passions and hidden urges in his audiences would respond to such images. Among the pious people who made up the bulk of Graham’s audiences, the reaction

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<sup>21</sup> *New Orleans Times-Biscayne* (9 October 1954) 5.

<sup>22</sup> Billy Graham, *Hour of Decision* (July 26, 1953).

<sup>23</sup> Graham, “Our Teen-Age Problem.”

<sup>24</sup> Billy Graham, “Hate vs. Love,” *Hour of Decision* radio address, no. 17 (28 June 1955).

<sup>25</sup> Billy Graham, *Hour of Decision* radio address, no. 17 (9 December 1956).

would then take the form of revulsion and intensification of guilt and anxiety necessary to prompt a “decision.”

It was assumed that each individual would recognize his or her own worst impulses in the sins Graham would so graphically portray. Sometimes the “conversion experience” provides satisfactorily release; sometimes it does not. In either case, this type of revival preaching (that is certainly akin to good acting) can, at times, cause serious mental upset to unstable audience members. According to James McAllister, as a result of Graham’s campaign in North Carolina in 1951, “Sixty-nine doctors in Greensboro reported 58 cases of serious emotional disturbance which they attributed to the Crusade.”<sup>26</sup> A few of the doctors who reported these problems described disturbing details. For instance, one doctor reported: “I did have one patient who came to me of his own accord, and threatened self-mutilation and removal of his genital organs on account of past sins. I would hesitate to say that this was a result of the Billy Graham Crusade, although this patient had been attending regularly.”<sup>27</sup>

### **Graham’s Use of Concentration**

As Graham’s evangelism began to catch on, but before his seemingly instantaneous rise in 1949, Graham’s wife, Ruth, told him that he was preaching “too loud, too fast.” Once she told him that in the pulpit he “pranced around like an uppity pig.” “Bill, Jesus [...] just preached the gospel, and that’s all he has called you to do.”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> James L. McAllister, “Evangelical Faith and Billy Graham,” *Social Action*, XIX (March 1953): 17.

<sup>27</sup> McAllister, 19.

<sup>28</sup> Wendy Zoba, “Billy’s Rib,” *Christianity Today* (13 November 1995): 28.

Graham later recalled his preaching of the early 1940s, "I had a lapel microphone and I'd walk back and forth and preach as though there was no amplification [...] back then I preached with much more fire and vigor. Part of that was youthfulness, part of it was intensity, part of it was conviction. And part of it was ignorance."<sup>29</sup> With this said, Graham fought hard to become a better preacher and his determination to learn paid off. When he was in the pulpit, Graham's focus on the task was absolute. The *Saturday Evening Post* wrote of Graham, "His concentration is such a major part of his intellectual capacities that you can almost feel it."<sup>30</sup> Like an adept actor, focus was easy for Graham. Graham admitted that when he was on stage he did not feel like he was in front of an audience of thousands, and even if nobody else was actually there, he would still preach.

Similar to an actor who must prepare for different size houses and audience members, Graham's style of delivery would also differ from audience to audience. Stanley High writes, "I have seen him, gowned and hooded, preach from a pulpit of upper-bracket dignity and, for forty minutes, not noticeably change his upright stance or gesture more than mildly or come any closer to shouting than such a congregation would be accustomed to – which would not be close."<sup>31</sup> In 1955 when Graham preached at Cambridge, the United Press reported that his style changed when he

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<sup>29</sup> Charles Hirshberg, "The Eternal Crusader," *Life* (November 1994): 108.

<sup>30</sup> "Billy Graham: The Man at Home," *Saturday Evening Post* (Spring 1972): 47.

<sup>31</sup> High, 90.

donned the academic regalia, "This was cloistered Cambridge and Graham adapted his style to fit. He changed to academic robes. He spoke quietly. He came without ballyhoo. The pitch of his voice is lower. The content is more intellectual. But the message of Christianity was unaltered."<sup>32</sup>

### **Graham's Use of Emotionalism**

Graham was very adept at making audience-centric adjustments, merging humor, shock, his focus, and emotional appeals and he never denied that the process of conversion may, and probably will, involve emotionalism. "I find it hard to think that the preaching of John the Baptist, Christ, and the Apostles set no emotion aflame," he says, and he insists, "fear is a legitimate motive" in evangelism. But like many professional revivalists, he deplores any type of hysteria or any overtly demonstrative exhibitions of feelings at his meetings. "We never have any shouting or outbursts of any kind."<sup>33</sup> As Billy Sunday and D. L. Moody did before him, Graham made sure his ushers, attendants, and counselors were instructed to discourage shouts of "Amen" or "Hallelujah," no clapping or typical Pentecostal church histrionics. Graham wanted rapt attention at all time with nothing to distract from his sermon. Audiences were instructed to react as a well-disciplined unit, not as a mob of excited individuals. Strangely enough, individualism was, in this respect, out of place in Graham's "modern" evangelism. Resembling today's theatre audiences who laugh as one, clap as one, and gasp wholly as a unit, Graham fought against individual reactions. Graham

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<sup>32</sup> High, 92.

<sup>33</sup> Billy Graham, *Look* (7 February, 1956): 48

could arouse emotional hysteria easily enough, but if he did, he would have lost the majority of church support. Kenneth de Courcy summed up Graham's message and style fairly accurately when he said:

It follows [from Graham's preaching] that a confidence is created which before was entirely lacking; and that a mass of people once afraid and divided become united and brave because inherent in Dr. Graham's preaching is the certainty of human failure, upon which is super-imposed the certainty of Divine intervention, and thus, the saving of the world situation [...] If you like, it is escapism in its ultimate form.<sup>34</sup>

### **Barrymore of the Pulpit and the Airwaves**

When Graham was only 35 years old, *Look* magazine identified Graham as the "Barrymore of the pulpit." The general response of the news magazines and the tabloids, including Hollywood's *Variety* and the *New York Post*, was to picture the evangelist as a brilliant, even astonishing performer with no accurate grasp of what his faith was all about or how to measure his staying power with the turbulence that would undoubtedly come his way. He was considered more of a performer, a religious entertainer who knew spectacle. One reporter summed it up by stating, "He's a trouper just as John Barrymore was a trouper and, like Barrymore, there's more than a little ham in him. Like Barrymore, he knows what a handsome profile is worth, and like any other showman, Billy Graham the evangelist, is in business to make a living."<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Kenneth de Courcy, "Letter to Dr. Carl McIntire," *Intelligence Digest* (July 1954): 6-7.

<sup>35</sup> Arthur Lester Frederick, *Look* (5 May 1953).

The *Hour of Decision* radio broadcasts started soon after Graham's first brush with celebrity which helped to aim his meteoric rise and also helped him to capitalize on his Barrymore-ish gifts. On a Saturday in October 1950, ABC engineers and producers set up a studio of sorts on a crusade platform, and each of the crusade regulars had a chance to show their wares based on a script that had been haggled over for a few months. At precisely 2pm, Cliff Barrows announced for the first time and to over a thousand radio stations, "This is the Hour of Decision." Reaction to the first broadcast was immediate and widespread. To Minneapolis, the BGEA headquarters came hundreds of letters the next day and before the week was out, more than a thousand letters had been received by the BGEA in reference to the original broadcast. The opening broadcast closed with Graham's improvised ending, "Good-bye, and may the Lord bless you, real good." Grammatically incorrect yes, but this rube with a radio appealed directly to the people of heartland America so that after just five weeks on the air, *The Hour of Decision* had earned the highest Nielsen audience rating ever for religious programming.<sup>36</sup>

### **Graham's Criticisms Increase**

As Graham's popularity and notoriety increased, however, so did the volume of his worst critics. In regard to his "costume," for some, the appearance of Graham in a flashy sport coat or tailored suit (Graham would not ever be found in a long black robe with collar) was an insult to tradition. Donald Meyer of UCLA writing in *The New*

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<sup>36</sup> Billy Graham, *America's Hour of Decision* (Wheaton, IL: Van Kampen Press, 1951) 64-65.



*Republic*, saves his disgust for the differences he saw in Graham compared with William Jennings Bryan, Billy Sunday, or Elmer Gantry: “Graham is glamorous. Beautifully groomed, beautifully assured, brilliant in profile, beautifully tonic, Graham comes to his audiences, a man who is equipped to meet all the requirements of the American cult of happy, healthy living, popularity and self assurance.”<sup>37</sup>

Other criticisms were leveled during the London 1954 crusade, Graham’s first foray abroad as a nationally famous evangelist. The Billy Graham Greater London Crusade ran into rough water even before he even arrived. He set sail confident that with the support of President Eisenhower, Britain’s Evangelical Alliance, the Salvation Army, and the Plymouth Brethren, the crusade would be well received. However, when three days out from Southampton Graham learned that the English press had reacted negatively to the enormous public relations barrage that Graham’s publicity manager, Gerald Beaven, had put in motion. The *London Evening News* called Graham an “American hot gospel specialist who was ‘actor-manager of the show’” and warned that “like a Biblical Baedeker<sup>38</sup> he takes his listeners strolling down Pavements of Gold, introduces them to a rippling-muscled Christ, who resembles Charles Atlas with a halo, then drops them abruptly into the Lake of Fire for a sample scalding.”<sup>39</sup> Graham’s success in London was likened for many as a matter of advertising. As the evangelist himself insisted, had that been all there was to it, the Crusade would have fizzled out.

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<sup>37</sup> Donald Meyer, *The New Republic* 133 (22 August 1955).

<sup>38</sup> A term to akin to “travel guide.”

<sup>39</sup> *London Evening News*, 23 February 1954 (Qtd. in Lowe, 73).

Those who objected to posters on hoardings and bill-boards were reminded by the editor of one journal that ‘the market-place forum was the New Testament equivalent of Graham’s campaign.’”<sup>40</sup>

Through careful comic timing of his words, shocking rhetoric, thoughtful costuming, emotional recall, and attentive advertising, Graham was able to win over many of his London critics with his gospel theatre. It is clear that Graham had worked conscientiously at conflating theatre and acting in his ministry, pioneering alternative ways of communicating the evangelical message through various media. It was a fortuitous moment for Graham: Post-World War II America was a nation of seekers, with church membership, sales of religious books, enrollment at religious institutions on the rise and attendance at revivals increasing. Predictably so were evangelists who sprouted up like America’s new cash-crop. For Graham, his *Hour of Decision* radio broadcasts<sup>41</sup> reached millions as did his syndicated newspaper column “My Answer.” The BGEA would go on to use television and film to reach new audiences.

### **Graham Takes it to Television**

Beginning in 1957 television had become his most effective ministry and the BGEA used it extensively especially since the telecasts reached into half of all American households. When asked by the New York Times how he wanted his broadcasts to come across to his public, Graham responded:

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<sup>40</sup> Cook, 122-123.

<sup>41</sup> Aimee Semple McPherson was one of the first evangelists to see the possibilities of radio, preaching over the airwaves on her own radio station owned by her church. She used it to build support for her Angelus Temple in Los Angeles, then the largest church in America.

I would have someone like Fred Waring's orchestra and glee club playing and singing old religious hymns. Then a five to eight minute talk emphasizing a moral or spiritual truth. And then an interview with a famous person such as Roy Rogers or vice-President Nixon who would tell of his spiritual experience. This would be followed by a sermon. The program would be produced on the same scale as a major entertainment show.<sup>42</sup>

Graham's success at tying his ministry with broadcasts of his crusades started when the 1954 Greater London Crusade was recorded and sent all over England and Scotland. With this endeavor, the BGEA pioneered the use of land relays that transmitted Graham's voice to rented spaces. Proving they could do large-scale broadcasting, for the 1957 New York Crusade ABC contracted with the BGEA to broadcast eighteen sessions nationally. The live broadcasts, sent out using Cinemascope, were a huge success, receiving more than 30,000 decisions for Christ.<sup>43</sup>

The camera loved Graham's handsome visage and while there is no way to truly measure the impact that television had on his success, one thing is certain, Graham's love affair with television went hand in hand with the burgeoning business. In 1950 just over four million households owned TVs; by 1960, forty-five million did, or one in

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<sup>42</sup> Qtd. in Marshall Fishwick and Ray E. Browne, *The God Pumpers: Religion in the Electronic Age* (Bowling Green, OH: University Popular Press, 1987) 66.

<sup>43</sup> Fishwick and Browne, 66.

every two households.<sup>44</sup> Perhaps no other form of media would do more to help the evangelist than the intimate and always present television. Television brought his crusades into the living rooms of all Americans with a talking box. Tens of millions would gather to watch Graham's quarterly campaigns.

The popularity of *The Hour of Decision* radio broadcasts convinced Graham and the BGEA that they should air portions of the radio program on television as well as the crusades. Some television broadcasts of the radio show even enlisted filmed segments from live crusades, where home viewers could get a taste of what it would be like to attend a crusade in person. This undoubtedly led to larger audiences and larger arenas. Moreover, television, in its infancy, was not like television today, in that viewers were more familiar with seeing their entertainment in person. The taped Crusade must have seemed like a long commercial for the live event. The first of these telecasts featured Cliff Barrows leading familiar hymns with a large choir, George Beverly Shea singing a solo, celebrities giving personal testimonies followed by Graham's sermon. The climax of these broadcasts showed streams of people heading towards the front to make their decisions for Christ.

### **Television Forces Style Change**

The interesting aspect of these newly found forums forced Graham to make adjustments to his bombastic style, an attribute that is readily apparent in watching his live broadcasts. He apparently did this mostly because television at this time had

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<sup>44</sup> *United States Census*, U.S. Census Bureau, (15 June, 1998)  
<<http://www.census.gov/population/documentation/twps0027/tab18.txt>>.

difficulty focusing on a moving object, especially depth of field focusing (the distance in front of and beyond the subject that appears to be in focus; today's cameras still have difficulty with depth of field focus). Focus was not automatic as it is today.<sup>45</sup> Cameras in the 1950s had three lenses that provided shifts in focal length for closer views from the same camera; Graham seemingly knew this, so he began to restrain his movements, especially moving further and closer to the camera. Furthermore, cameras were heavy and were not easily shifted back and forth to catch his habitual marathon pacing, so it was imperative that Graham find a new way of performing. Graham ostensibly catered to the camera by staying more still and moderating his hand gestures.

Graham also must have known that sound recording on these films was problematic at best. Most cameras used (and some still do) a double-system of recording sound separately from the film. Then, in studio, the sound is coordinated with the images. Today this is done electronically (once the camera starts, so does the sound recording), but in the 1950s this was not the case and sound technicians had to try to match up the spoken word with the on-film visual. This can also be problematic when the sound editor must cut through a very fast talker. To help this, Graham presumably used softer tones, slowed down considerably, and acted more naturalistically.<sup>46</sup> He also found more emotional states than anger. In his Australia

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<sup>45</sup> Personal interview with Dr. Randall King, Director of WIWU, Professor of Communication, Media, and Technology, Indiana Wesleyan University.

<sup>46</sup> Cinemascope, a 1953 breakthrough in film technology recorded sound as well and became the industry standard. However, it needed a multi-channel magnetic stereo unit also produced by the camera manufacture (20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox). To keep theatre owners from having to upgrade their entire sound systems, they were often provided with separate recordings that needed to be started with the

1959 broadcast, Graham seems to be speaking through tears when describing his family's affect on his ministry.

Also in the Australia Crusade of 1959, Graham's star status again went international. "Television had come to Australia only two years earlier, and Billy Graham was its first national attraction [...] When Melbourne station GTV got a large positive response to a taped replay of a sermon, it broadcast others and found itself with a star on its lens."<sup>47</sup> Through all these various media outlets, people all around the country, from the small and large towns, could now understand what Billy Graham was all about and be able to make their own decisions about the man and his ministry. Moreover, these new audiences were subject to the new Graham -- steadier, softer, and a star with messages that were easy to understand by the theologically untrained and the regular churchgoer. Graham admitted that his "preaching is based on the proposition that the evangelist must articulate a message capable of reaching as broad a base as possible. This message must have a sense of urgency and it must articulate in the clearest terms the basic Gospel message of salvation through Christ."<sup>48</sup>

Graham also began to produce some *Hour of Decision* television segments in a living room or parlor setting. Without fully acknowledging the place, audiences were led to believe this was Grahams' personal abode. The broadcasts were conducted in an

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movie. If the movie and the sound were not started in direct conjunction, the sound would be behind or in front of the image for the entire movie unless the process was stopped and started over again.

<sup>47</sup> Martin, 255.

<sup>48</sup> Deborah Hart Strober and Gerald S. Strober, *A Day in the Life of Billy Graham* (New York: Square One Publishers, 2003) 55.

almost talk show fashion, discussing current events and how these events needed the power of believers in the gospel to change the country's direction and the course of individual lives. After running for nearly three years with a very modest viewing audience, Graham and his advisors decided to temporarily give up the television experience and concentrate more on the broadcast of the Crusades and film.

### **Star Status Has Benefits**

Graham's upward spiral reached a new zenith in 1957's New York Crusade. "On the first night of June, ABC broadcast the crusade live for the first time. *Variety* now hailed Graham as 'tremendous box office.' He won the highest ratings – some seven million viewers -- for the network in the impossible slot against Jackie Gleason and Perry Como. (Said Perry, 'Very fine rating.' Said Jackie, 'No comment.')"<sup>49</sup> With his lofty status, he had reached a new kind of stardom of his own (befriending and mingling with other stars only helped to propel his image upward). Starting around 1957 (after his colossal 16 week New York Crusade), Graham appeared regularly on Bob Hope, Jack Benny, and Woody Allen television specials, even appearing on the hit show, "What's My Line"<sup>50</sup> in October of 1960. On one particular Woody Allen Special, Allen agrees to come to see a Billy Graham Crusade to "see the show." Furthermore, Marshall Frady writes, "the only television programs he himself tended to watch now, aside from westerns, would be interviews and performances of those *other* celebrities

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<sup>49</sup> Nancy Gibbs and Michael Duffy, 75.

<sup>50</sup> A clip of this can be seen on YouTube. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qkHN74T6Apc>. In the clip, Graham informs Joey Bishop that he would make a very good "bishop" which got a large laugh.

whom he had personally counseled.”<sup>51</sup> And, like a movie star, Graham worked diligently on his own appearance. After an embarrassing start when he and his associates, wearing loud, hand-painted neckties and white buckskin shoes, with Graham in a pistachio-green suit, were photographed kneeling on the White House lawn to demonstrate how they had prayed with President Truman, Graham took more time to make sure he was living up to corporate entertainment expectations. His suits, sent to him periodically by a Tennessee admirer, fit perfectly and were of the right conservative tone. He also had cosmetic dentistry done to “brighten his smile,” and he worked hard on his hair, wearing it thick, wavy, and a bit long over the temples, so “he won’t look like a skinned rabbit” when he appeared on television.<sup>52</sup>

To all who have studied Graham, it was a good living, a movie star’s living in fact -- the best hotel rooms, frequent invitations to use corporate or private planes. His books generated a handsome cash flow (much of which went into trust funds for his children; the rest went into the BGEA). Newspaper columns and articles for *Reader’s Digest* produced a generous yield for winter vacations or a new wing on his residence in Montreat. Most biographers have described these early years and how Graham changed the way money was collected and spent, but even with these changes and

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<sup>51</sup> Frady, 249 (emphasis added).

<sup>52</sup> Harold H. Martin, “Revivalist Billy Graham,” *The Saturday Evening Post* (13 April, 1966) 21.



incorporating the Association which provided salaries to all the participants, the charge that Graham was a religious star continued.<sup>53</sup>

### **Graham Uses His Movie Star Status**

Shortly after he gained the national spotlight with his 1949 Los Angeles crusade, Graham formed Billy Graham Evangelistic Films, a motion picture company housed in Burbank California, designed to produce Hollywood-style movies that would inspire and attract converts. This would become World Wide Pictures headed by Dick Voss in 1953. One of the first films was *His Eye Is on the Sparrow* which starred singer and actress, Ethel Waters. Waters became involved in the BGEA after attending one of Graham's campaigns. The company's first commercial success came in 1965 with *The Restless Ones*, a movie released in first-run theatres around the nation. It starred Johnny Crawford who early in his career played the son of *The Rifle Man*. One of the WWP's most charming, yet amateurish productions was *Gospel Road – The Story of Jesus*, filmed on location in Israel. The short movie starred Johnny Cash, a young John Denver, and Kris Kristofferson.

Playing himself, Graham even took roles in WWP movies *Oil Town, USA* (1954), *The Restless Ones* (1965), *Two a Penny* (1967), *For Pete's Sake* (1968),<sup>54</sup> and he narrated *Man in the 5<sup>th</sup> Dimension* (1964). Graham even lent himself out to a 13-minute government film, *Beyond the Hills*, used to illustrate an anti-poverty spending program.

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<sup>53</sup> Stanley High, *Billy Graham: The personal story of the man, his message, and his mission*" (New York: McGraw-Hill) 153.

<sup>54</sup> Interestingly, Teri Garr had her film debut in this movie playing a wayward young woman looking for spiritual answers.

Granted, in all these films, Graham played himself, but it is not a stretch to see how lending his figure to these films added to their ability to be seen and his ability to be seen as a movie star, or at least, the Christian equivalent of one.

Additionally, Graham's ability to move from the pulpit to the camera illustrates his talent to "act" as himself. In fact, Graham obviously felt at home around other movie stars. In 1968, Graham told columnist Cleveland Armory that, as a celebrity, he had been invited to and had attended movie stars' parties, such as ones given by Debbie Reynolds, with guests Jack Lemmon, Glenn Ford, Edie Adams, and Judy Garland.<sup>55</sup> Graham's stature as a movie celebrity was not lost on America's media producers as well. In addition to Cecil B. DeMille wanting Graham to star in his biblical movies<sup>56</sup> (particularly to play Samson) and constant offers to play other characters in movies and television, after his 1954 London crusade NBC offered Graham a five-year contract at \$1million per year to go to television opposite Arthur Godfrey.<sup>57</sup> Needless to say, Graham decided to stick to the sawdust trail. DeMille supposedly told Graham afterward "that he knew all along that I would say that, and he said it had restored his faith."<sup>58</sup> Furthermore, using various appearances on popular television shows, such as Johnny Carson, Dick Cavett, David Frost, or Woody Allen, helped to serve as conduits for his continuing and expanding popularity.

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<sup>55</sup> Cleveland Armory, *This Week*, ABC (14 April 1968).

<sup>56</sup> Bishop, 75

<sup>57</sup> Harold H. Martin, 22. (Arthur Godfrey was a radio and television entertainer who was often introduced by his nickname, "The Old Redhead" and strongly associated with his sponsor, Lipton Tea.)

<sup>58</sup> Gibbs and Duffy, 49.

To truly gather a taste of Graham's popular appeal, one should not go to the written word to judge his sermon development, for most will only find scripts that are filled with simplistic plotlines and no payoff. To truly understand Graham's appeal, one must watch and listen to his recorded sermons, for they give more evidence of his persuasive powers of performance than his written sermons. Perhaps the most obvious impression from listening to Graham's sermons is his dynamism. He transmits a sense of authority despite the folksy, simplistic nature of his sermons. In his earlier preaching there was also a note of aggressiveness, which sometimes bordered on brashness, but by 1960, that all but disappeared. Incidentally, 1960 is when the lampooning and negative characterizations started, most significantly with 1960's *Elmer Gantry*. After the movie, Graham seemed to gain the ability to sound more confident without seeming arrogant. Even when being interviewed by the likes of Woody Allen or Larry King,<sup>59</sup> Graham's ability to mask nervousness has long been a strong characteristic. He projects a strong credibility, no doubt because of his own internal consistency and ability to stay on point with his message and because of his own personal, unshakable faith in the authority upon which he stands. Like a worker on an assembly line staying on task, lest he fall behind, or a Method actor, his super-objective is plain and his tactics are well rehearsed.

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<sup>59</sup> See "Interview with Billy Graham," *The Kraft Music Hall Presents The Woody Allen Special* (ABC, 21 Sept. 1969) and Billy Graham interview with Larry King, Prod., *Larry King Live* (CNN, 29 June 1999).

## Graham's Simplicity in His Messages

An examination of many of Graham's recorded messages<sup>60</sup> reveals a certain pattern to his performance technique. First, no matter what his text, Graham basically preaches one sermon which could have the title of "Come Unto Christ." The formula for his sermon is simple: There is evidence that you are in trouble; that trouble may be described by many names, but it is simply sin; sin is alienation from God, but God wants to do something about it; God has provided help in Christ; God's love invites all to come unto him; you may be converted by responding to this love. It is, in fact, a love story with a beginning, middle, and end and has the essence of all dramatic conflict. Most of Graham's sermons follow this formula, even those with strong ethical themes, a characteristic that Graham does not deny. One British critic said of Graham after his visit to London in 1955: "His theology is 50 years behind contemporary scholarship. He gives no sign of having read any of it from the last three decades. He is completely out of step with the majority of ministers and pastors."<sup>61</sup> Graham's response is to not respond, but to work on reaching as many people as possible with his carefully crafted and ecumenical messages.

From the beginning of his message, he identifies with his audience and works to establish rapport, whether by casual introductory remarks or formal references to people, places, or events that are particularly familiar with the local audience. He also strives to identify with his audience by using common, almost folksy language.

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<sup>60</sup> BGEA Archives, Billy Graham Library, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL.

<sup>61</sup> Brian Welbeck, *Reynold's News* (May 22, 1955).

Whether speaking to non-Christian, hostile, or indifferent audiences, Graham tries to use ordinary language to express the Christian gospel. With “insiders”, such as pastors or evangelical conferences, Graham uses more “coded” language -- theological terms and churchly expressions that would be understood only by those groups. He never speaks in a condescending manner to lay-audiences or in an intellectual mode to the more sophisticated. Part of his communicative success rests in his direct ability to be brazen without appearing dangerous. William Samarin writes about this tricky phenomenon of speaking to many differing groups without appearing protean: “For every speech community, whether it be a whole denomination on a national scale or the congregation of one church in this denomination, there are taken-for-granted expectations for the way language will be used and for what purposes” for “exploited” ends.<sup>62</sup>

Graham’s critics have claimed that he does not mold himself to the situation, but is a master manipulator and although earlier in his crusades some of these criticisms were indeed valid, his maturing ministry throughout the 1950s manifested a desire to let the individual decide on the basis of his message without further pleading. Graham was, in many ways, a product of America’s new mass culture, an emblem of the times, competing in the market place with political figures, entertainers, and sports figures. His style and personality, his faith in the individual, and his unending patriotism was a marketer’s dream. He was a phenomenon of the mass media, trumping all forms with his own intelligent design. He was, in short, a star, a fact he often denied. He claimed

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<sup>62</sup> Samarin, 5.

that the mass of people came to his revivals not to see him and the spectacle he brought with him, but to hear and respond to the message. This was not entertainment. Nevertheless, like crowds in the 1950s gathered together to hear Elvis Presley, Graham's admirers gathered hours in advance of the "show." At the Australia Crusade of 1959, crowds greeted him at the plane with cheers and posters, a welcoming fit for the Beatles, but a strange response for a visiting evangelist, unless that person has achieved some sort of celebrity status. At the actual event, more than 500 teenagers screamed as he walked to the platform. The crowd pressed against a rope fence to take pictures and to ask for autographs while twenty ushers tried to keep them back.<sup>63</sup>

The end result of Graham's theatrical performance style is an exacerbation and exaltation of the fears and doubts, the frustrations and anxieties, both personal and worldwide, of his congregants and listeners. Having reduced those who seek peace of soul into a state of panic and hopelessness, he then offers them a quick and simple way out -- a mass ritual of atonement which, momentarily at least, assures them they have done all they could, they have been forgiven of their mistakes, and now God will take over and do what they are unable to do. Meanwhile, they have the satisfaction of knowing they are on the Lord's side, they are assured of safety and eternal bliss no matter what happens.

Graham makes no apologies for the fact that his team used all the methods of mass communication to publicize his ministry like one might publicize a movie or a

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<sup>63</sup> Bishop, 98.

movie star. "We are selling the greatest product on earth, why shouldn't we promote it as effectively as we promote a bar of soap."<sup>64</sup> Graham saw the potential of radio, movies and television, and was as much an instigator of this potential as he was the user of these new mediums, which helped to shape his audiences' view of reality. By offering viewers a hopeful slant on life, Graham both reflected the reality of his age and helped to define it. Because television provides such a powerful representation of reality, its impact on society is profound, and the producers of Graham's specials, therefore, had the potential, to change audiences' perceptions. Indeed, Graham's ability to change his acting strategy to take advantage of emergent media forms made a large impact in his ministry.

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<sup>64</sup> Harold H. Martin, 18.

## Chapter Five

### “The Curtain Falls on Graham’s Performance”

In 2005, Billy Graham came full circle in dispelling the perception that he was another “Elmer Gantry.” In June of that year an elderly Billy Graham returned to New York City, a half-century after a mountain-top moment in his evangelistic career, a crusade that had stretched on for four months in one of the most un-Protestant and secular of American locales. Stricken with prostate cancer and Parkinson’s disease, among other health problems, and reliant on a special lectern that allowed him to sit while preaching, the white-haired Graham held only three services during what was billed as his final crusade. Most of the 230,000-plus attendees likely knew what to expect from this lion in winter -- Graham and his associates had perfected the formulaic crusade service. Many elements of his services had remained largely unchanged since the 1950s. The event featured the bass-baritone of soloist George Beverley Shea, the volunteer choir and ushers drawn from area churches, the climactic and solemn moment of invitation, and, of course, the presence of celebrities and politicians on the crusade platform. Even the camera angles and how long Graham would preach were the same (precisely 36 minutes each time).

For this 2005 curtain on his career, Graham had invited Bill and Hillary Clinton to join him on the platform. The former President stood with Graham at the pulpit and remembered how his admiration for the evangelist came from Graham’s integrated service Clinton had attended as a child in Little Rock. In an interview with the *New Yorker*, Clinton expanded on the 1959 service:



When he gave the call – amid all the civil-rights trouble, to see blacks and whites coming down the aisle together at the football stadium, which is the scene, of course, of our great football rivalries and all that meant to people in Arkansas -- it was an amazing, amazing thing. If you weren't there, and if you're not a southerner, and if you didn't live through it, it's hard to explain. It made an enormous impression on me. I was at that age where kids question everything, you know? And all of a sudden I said, 'This guy has got to be real, because he did this when he didn't have to.'<sup>1</sup>

Interestingly, Graham surprised many of the attendees by implying that Hillary Clinton was presidential material by saying, "And Hillary could stay home and run the country."<sup>2</sup>

As journalists filed their stories which sounded a lot like obituaries, the glow from Graham's status as the grandfather of modern American evangelicalism made him seem removed from the ebb and flow of history. The New York crusade coverage was a commentary on both the grace of time and the thoroughly mainstream status of Graham's brand of Christianity at the start of the twenty-first century. Graham had fought hard not be another "Elmer Gantry" and, based on his reception in 2005, it appears the Graham was successful in that endeavor.

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<sup>1</sup> Peter J. Boyer, "The Big Tent: Billy Graham, Franklin Graham, and the Transformation of American Evangelicalism," *The New Yorker* (22 August 2005) 42-55 (Clinton quoted in 42, 44). See also *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 24 June 2005; and *New York Times*, 27 June 2005.

<sup>2</sup> James L. Evans, "Billy Graham's Final Crusade," *Sightings* (7 July 2005) 2.

When Graham started out, he fought hard to distance himself from the “Elmer Gantry” stereotype of the wild-eyed, greedy manipulator of people’s emotions. In step with this desire, Graham’s “performance as preacher” significantly changed. He stopped denouncing “commies” and “pinks” (the very kind of demonstrative vocalization that won Graham notice from Hearst in the first place) and shed his white spat shoes and pulpit acrobatics (identified with the earlier Billy Sunday’s similar gyrations). Music director Cliff Barrows put his trombone away, and the crusade team toned down what Grady Wilson (former director of the BGEA) called “the loud hallelujahs,” a phrase that characterized an earlier participating repertoire of congregational singing.

In toning down his and his audiences’ overt dramatics, Graham also learned to distance himself from religious orders who trumpeted against the vices. In doing so, Graham concentrated more on the love of God, choosing language more palatable than say Billy Sunday who lambasted the “hog-jowled, weasel-eyed, sponge-columned, mushy-fisted, jelly-spined, pussy-footing, four-flushing, Charlotte-russe Christians.”<sup>3</sup> Likewise, the vocabulary buff and president of the Sun Oil Company, advised Graham to cease using big words in his sermons to make the message more easily understood to children.<sup>4</sup> Graham took his advice even though it may have led to criticisms of another sort.

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<sup>3</sup> Roger Bruns, *Billy Graham: A Biography* (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 2004) 12

<sup>4</sup> Terry W. Whalin, *Billy Graham: America’s Greatest Evangelist* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2002) 242.

Taking his clue from Sinclair Lewis' 1927 novel, *Elmer Gantry* and the same titled movie in 1960, Graham performed as an Anti-Elmer Gantry through his preaching performances. An effective organizer, Graham found ways to distance himself from matters of money, he had a clear desire for collective piety among his inner circle, and relied on his most trusted friends to hold him accountable. He was also able to hold others accountable as well, including churches and para-church organizations outside the auspices of the BGEA. Cynics might say that this could be seen as the blind leading the blind, but for Graham, this was the only way to ensure that the perception of impropriety would be lessened.

During the decades following the Civil Rights Movement, Vietnam, and Watergate, Graham had softened his eschatological and Jeremiad themes in his sermons, and had impressed former critics by embracing nuclear disarmament and criticizing the Christian Right. He also benefited from an irenic demeanor that grew more convincing with age. His refusal to cast stones in the culture wars, as numerous commentators observed, stood in refreshing relief from the rhetorical gauntlets thrown down by Pat Robertson, James Dobson, and even his own son and heir apparent, Franklin Graham. As Peter Boyer recognized, Billy Graham had "figured out how to triangulate American Protestant Christianity" and cultivate mainstream appeal without burning conservative bridges.<sup>5</sup> He had come to represent the good half of evangelicalism that in 2005 again stood as the ascendant religious force in American

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<sup>5</sup> Boyer, 42-55.

society. His more controversial days (1971, for example, when two Baptist dissidents called him a “court prophet” in the Nixon White House, or in 1958, when a Deep South governor echoed the sentiments of many segregationists in castigating him as a southerner whose “endorsement of racial mixing has done much harm”<sup>6</sup>) were far behind him. Yet a mere three years before the 2005 New York crusade, Graham had shed a final round of residue from the Nixon years -- the release of a White House conversation in which the evangelist appeared to readily affirm the president’s anti-Semitic ranting.<sup>7</sup> Graham had responded to the disclosure with a swift, if somewhat puzzled contrition, apologizing to Jewish leaders for words he could not remember uttering.<sup>8</sup>

He had long stressed that his flirtation with politics had ended. Still, only two years earlier, on the cusp of the 2000 presidential election, he had offered effusive support for candidate George W. Bush, who credited Graham with sparking his journey toward born-again Christianity.<sup>9</sup> A decade before this second Bush assumed office,

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<sup>6</sup> Will D. Campbell and James Y. Holloway, “An Open Letter to Dr. Billy Graham,” *Katallagete* Winter 1971 (12 October 1958) inside cover-3.

<sup>7</sup> In early 2002, the National Archives released the tape of a ninety-minute conversation recorded in the Oval Office in 1972 between President Richard Nixon and Graham. In the unguarded discussion immediately following the annual White House prayer breakfast, Graham made strongly negative comments about Jewish control of media and how Jewish Hollywood producers were spiraling the country downward. Although it was thirty years previous, the incident infuriated the Jewish community. When they tapes were made public, Graham quickly apologized. “My remarks did not reflect my love of the Jewish people. I humble ask the Jewish people to reflect on my actions on behalf of the Jews over the years that contradict my words in the Oval Office that day.”

<sup>8</sup> *White House conversation 662-4*, 1 February 1972, National Archives and Records Administration, Nixon Presidential Materials. See also *New York Times*, 4 April 2002, 17 March 2002, and 12 June 2005.

<sup>9</sup> *Atlanta Constitution* and *Florida Times-Union* (6 November 2000). Interestingly, when asked about the incident, Graham had no recollection.

Graham had spent a night in the White House with George H. W. and Barbara Bush watching television coverage of the start of the Persian Gulf War, a fact the elder Bush recounted at the National Prayer Breakfast.<sup>10</sup> During an era when religion and politics consorted brashly and unapologetically (and when Graham no longer commanded sustained media coverage), these incidents drew only passing attention. Clearly, the snapshot of Graham in New York City captured the twilight of a remarkable career that dated back to the end of World War II.

### **Conclusions on the Creation of a “New” Christianity**

Since the late 1940s Graham has not relinquished his status as one of the most identifiable and esteemed of Americans, someone who has easily mingled with the powerful, while retaining the common touch. As scholar Joe Barnhart recognized in the early 1970s, Graham functioned during his peak years as a kind of conduit through which flowed much of the zeitgeist of the latter half of the twentieth century. However, Graham was not, as Barnhart went on to contend, merely “an innocent tool of complex dynamics which he may little understand or appreciate.”<sup>11</sup> Rather, the evangelist functioned as a public actor in his own right. In engaging political leaders and the pressing issues of his times, he made important decisions that, while always weighed against his higher priorities as an evangelist, reflected his own values, his own notion of the social and spiritual good, and his Gantry-like need to endear himself to the public as

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<sup>10</sup> Graham, *Just As I Am*, 584-587 and Jim McGrath, ed., *Heartbeat: George Bush in His Own Words* (New York: Scribner, 2001) 134.

<sup>11</sup> Joe E. Barnhart, *The Billy Graham Religion* (Herndon, VA: Mowbray Press, 1974) 62-63.

the Anti-Elmer Gantry. His power, that is, was simultaneously readily visible and more than what met the eye.

Graham contributed to the construction of the American Christian psyche in three main ways. First, he brought moral integrity to itinerant preaching. Graham and his associates figured out how to distance themselves from negative issues that had troubled and perplexed earlier evangelists. To counteract these issues, Graham incorporated his association into the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, decided to stay away from local church trouble and fights with journalists over their programs. They also determined to not take “love offerings” for their sole financial support. Instead they salaried all of their staff (including Graham) and put more money into special mission programming and publicity for other denominations, including the local churches with whom they held their crusades. Furthermore, in order to avoid the appearance of competing with local pastors, the group decided to visit a city only if it received an invitation by the religious community. At an early meeting in Modesto, California, Graham and his associates set a pattern for financial accountability that would direct operations for years to come. This came to be known as the Modesto Manifesto.

In addition, the group charted a careful, if rather unusual and extreme strategy to ensure Graham would not be tainted by the suspicion of sexual impropriety. From that point on, Graham would make it a point not to travel, meet, or dine alone with any woman other than Ruth – even his own daughters when they came of age. Graham was still accused of primarily seeking financial and personal gain, but these charges did not

stick as they had on previous evangelists. A Scottish minister in a long letter to *The Scotsman* before Graham came to England for the first time in 1947 made the suggestion that the ultimate aim of Billy Graham's mission was "not the conversion of the British Isles or a revival of church life," but was disguised as "political anti-Communism."<sup>12</sup> Even a member of the House of Lords weighed in that Graham's methods were "cheap and vulgar" and "the lazy and indifferent were to be tickled to church as they expect to be tickled to death in other entertainment."<sup>13</sup> So before Graham arrived, these pastors, sure that he was just another religious opportunist, convinced the city council to prohibit him from speaking in the city auditorium. In response to these gestures, Graham decided not to fight, a radical change from his earlier combative nature. In speaking about Graham's qualities of leadership, Harold Myra and Marshall Shelley write: "when Billy showed up, he didn't grouse about this prohibition. Instead, he made appointments with his detractors, one by one, admitted his weaknesses as a young preacher, and assured them he wanted only to help them reach the city for Christ."<sup>14</sup> After these meetings, the hostility shifted into adamant support and Graham was allowed to preach in the city auditorium. The seeds of this experience can ultimately be seen in the manifesto manufactured a year later.

This led to Graham's second major contribution. Graham tirelessly advocated for cooperative evangelism, to work with varied and broad local Christian community

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<sup>12</sup> Cook, 123.

<sup>13</sup> Cook, 123.

<sup>14</sup> Myra and Shelley, 46.

denominations for common evangelistic efforts. This pragmatic ecumenism was in the tradition of the evangelist traditions of Whitefield, Moody, Finney, and Sunday, but by the time Graham took up the pulpit in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, this tradition was stunted by bitterness between moderates (modernists) and fundamentalists. Graham, instead, chose to distance himself from both camps and create a “new” revivalism that took the best from both sides. Before his 1949 Los Angeles crusade, Graham challenged the sponsoring committee to broaden its churches who would support the event. In return, the crusade won national attention. From this point on, Graham took this success and worked diligently to deepen the base of support. Graham ignored rallies from fundamentalists and more liberally minded church officials that he had either sold out the Gospel, or used a too simple-minded theology. Against vitriolic attacks by Carl McIntire, Bob Jones, John R. Rice, and Reinhold Niebuhr (among others), Graham retaliated by saying, “I would like to make myself clear. I intend to go anywhere, sponsored by anybody, to preach the Gospel of Christ if there are no strings attached to my message. I am sponsored by civic clubs, universities, ministerial associations, and councils of churches all over the world. I intend to continue.”<sup>15</sup>

The third and perhaps largest contribution is the way in which Graham used every media for evangelism. This use of media went all the way back to 1944 when Torrey Johnson, a well-known preacher in the Chicago area, gave Graham his own weekly radio program, “Songs in the Night.” Graham seized the idea and persuaded

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<sup>15</sup> Graham, *Just as I am*, 323. [Originally, Graham said these words in an address to the “National Association of Evangelicals,” printed in the *Christian Beacon* (4 April 1957)].



well-known soloist George Beverly Shea to be the “Ira Sankey” to Graham’s “Dwight Moody” and be the show’s primary musical performer. From this decision grew his syndicated newspaper column, *My Answer*, books (starting with *Peace of God* in 1953), *Christianity Today* in 1956, and *Decision* magazine in 1960. On the foundation of these early successes, Graham started his own radio program, “The Hour of Decision,” established World Wide Pictures to begin shooting “Hollywood”-style films, and began to broadcast his crusades, averaging four primetime specials each year for forty years. He and his association were also instrumental in using forward-looking technologies in satellite broadcasting with the first international broadcast from Australia when Graham visited there in 1959.

Using these successes like billboards, Graham has traveled from one country to another for years, giving counsel to many of the most powerful presidents and heads of state of this century. He retained the public’s affection while dozens of leaders with more official power fell by the wayside. This man’s name is still a household phrase (more than just a name), and everybody from the diehard cynic to the hero-worshipper is curious about how he really lives and what he really thinks. Furthermore, he received more publicity in his lifetime than almost any other public figure of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, including Presidents, Kings, Queens, Generals, and Entertainers. Politicians from the federal to the local government levels exploited his company. He hobnobbed with Hollywood’s most famous personalities, foreign rulers and the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church. He was even listed of the world’s “most admired men” for 36

consecutive years.<sup>16</sup> Chuck Colson, a prominent evangelical and Nixon-cohort convicted criminal, states that Graham is the “greatest evangelist of this century – perhaps the greatest since Paul.”<sup>17</sup>

### **Conclusions on Graham’s Performance**

As Graham’s reach became longer, his ability to see himself in clearer ways became stronger. Graham changed his style of delivery, including gesture, motivations, vocalizations, and movement or blocking. He also subtly changed his script and the theological stances for which he stood, embracing what he felt were the important aspects of Christianity and downplayed the perceived stumbling blocks for new believers. Furthermore, he gradually adapted his theology to be more acceptable to non-evangelical participants and other higher-church models, including Roman Catholicism, while continuing to preach the cross and instantaneous conversion. He also continued to use the “invitation” system for recruiting new converts. Graham’s view of mission also changed to include social responsibility as a separate mission of the church, rather than as a byproduct of individual conversion.

Lastly, Graham found a way to build on the past while creating his own brand of revivalism, replete with gimmicks, of course, but without a “cult of Graham.” While he has been honored by millions and supported by their millions of dollars, there has been a not-so-subtle absence of Graham t-shirts, Graham wrist-watches, shrines, or dedicated

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<sup>16</sup> *Christian News* (3 January 2000) Vol. 38, No. 1.

<sup>17</sup> Chuck Colson with Ellen Santilli Vaughn, *The Body* (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1996 Edition) 300.

spaces. What there was is an honoring of the past with an eye towards what the future, and in particular what the inventions of the future could do for the ministry. Graham recognized that America was born out of religious revivals -- many of America's first settlers came because of a need to express themselves religiously, expressed by the pilgrims, but institutionalized by the Puritans. Calvinistic theology exploded in America through the depth of Jonathan Edwards and the sheer magnetism of George Whitefield in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. "The Great Awakening" went on for decades through one revival after another with new revivalists cropping up all over the Atlantic seaboard. Nearly a century later, these great revivals found new life and more prominent institutions in Charles Grandison Finney. Finney even used the theatricality of his day by establishing his church in a New York City (former) theatre and went on to found Oberlin College. Later in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Dwight Moody teamed up with choir leader, Ira Sankey, and the model for religious revivals with a definite musical schema was born. With the 20<sup>th</sup> century came the greatest "character" of them all; Billy Sunday found that "acting a fool for Christ" had great benefits and turned him into a national star. But none of these figures can even approach the size and scope of Graham's crusades. Who knows, if any one of those who came before Graham had had the benefit of Graham's media services, perhaps they too would have had the type of ministry that Graham found. One thing is for certain, Graham squeezed more blood out of the media turnip than any other evangelist of his day or any day previous. To that end, Graham reached a celebrity status that few movie, television, radio stars, or even Presidents, could eclipse.

## Conclusions on Graham's Internationalized Ministry

As discussed in previous chapters, Graham made amazing strides in his ministry during the 1950s, including changes in his style, rhetoric, and theology. He also found new opportunities and added growth across the seas. With London in 1954, New York City in 1957, and Australia in 1959, Graham had truly epitomized the international religious celebrity. There were drawbacks to these avenues, however. London, New York, and Australia were his greatest crusades of the decade, but they all took something out of him physically. After New York, Graham had to take a six-week respite in Honolulu to recuperate from a reoccurring gastrointestinal infection (flu-like symptoms that Graham would fight the rest of his life). After Australia, he contracted a rare lung disease and again had to take a long recovery. On doctor's orders he cancelled preaching engagements in Manila, Hong Kong, Taipei, and Tokyo, and another Far East crusade had to go on without him. By 1960, Graham was forty years old and slowing down considerably, especially in comparison to the previous decade. Simply, Graham was tired. He found it harder to leave his quiet mountain home where he went for a few weeks between crusades. In fact, after the 1959 Australia Crusade, Graham took four months off before heading to Africa for a major portion of the year. Graham wrote,

As an evangelist I have often felt too far spent to minister from the pulpit to men and women who have filled stadiums to hear a message from the Lord. Yet again and again my weariness has vanished, and my strength has been renewed. I have been filled with God's power not only in my

soul by physically. On many occasions God has been especially real, and has sent His unseen angelic visitors to touch my body to let me be His messenger for heaven, speaking as a dying man to dying men.<sup>18</sup>

Over the next five decades (from 1961-2005), Graham did find new strength and appeared at another 290 crusades, including approximately 50 international crusades. Because of notoriety created through his ability to seemingly be in two places at one time, Graham will be remembered as one of the last (if not *the* last) great stalwarts for revivalism. His ability to draw people from all faiths, his uncanny aptitude at recreating himself as firebrand, culture-changer, ecumenical lover of all people, elder-statesman preacher, and finally, grandfather of American Protestantism (and perhaps we should add great-grandfather in retirement, but still affecting change), has generated millions of converts, thousands of churches, and the love and fury of countless others. Harvey Cox, a former theologian at Harvard Divinity School, says a century from now Graham's historical significance may be "as one of the major people to make use of the mass media and mass marketing techniques in religion."<sup>19</sup>

### **Remembered for the Ages**

Graham has, in fact, been skillful at avoiding the pitfalls of "big-time" religion and picking up the mean, radical right fundamentalism of the 1920s and today. He has kept alive the dreams of Christian America through turbulent times and into less troublesome attitudinal times without coasting or resting on his laurels. In the 1950s,

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<sup>18</sup> Billy Graham, *Angels: God's Secret Agents*, revised edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975) 73.

<sup>19</sup> Bishop, 80.

the cold war was at its peak and Americans were worried about their nation's direction, but Graham stepped forward to tell the nation it was not beyond hope. Filling the void that tanks and soldiers could not, Graham's performance of a new revivalism was directed simultaneously at the religiously fallen and the Communist evil. For the American people, this provided comfort and safety. Even when Graham appeared on the comedy show, "What's My Line" in October of 1960, he took the initiative to tell the audience how he looked straight into East Berlin and preached the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Graham said,

The meeting was held right on the line between East and West Berlin; and I stood on the old Reichstag. And to preach the gospel to that many people...and the communist people had pulled up six tanks and armored cars back of us. Yet there were hundreds of people lined up on the other side watching and listening as the loudspeakers carried the message over there. And about 40% of the audience was from East Germany."<sup>20</sup>

In 1960, Graham was what many Americans might call God's soldier, but he was also America's Christian General.

During the 1960s, however, Graham was eclipsed by other religion newsmakers such as Vatican II, Martin Luther King, Jr., and quasi-religious cult figures such as the Manson Family and Jim Jones (pre-Guyana). Interestingly, in 1960, there were writers already writing Graham's evangelistic obituary. William McLoughlin wrote,

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<sup>20</sup> Mark Goodman and Billy Toddman, prods., "What's My Line," Billy Graham, special guest (October, 1960) <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qkHN74T6Apc>.

On the whole it now looks as if Billy Graham's revivals have lost their luster. So much has been written about him and his work and each crusade is so similar to all the preceding ones that public curiosity has been satisfied. Billy Graham's revivals are no longer news – or at least they are only news when they show signs of not being particularly successful. Furthermore, there are no discernable results of his meetings which seem to merit conspicuous attention.<sup>21</sup>

Needless to say, McLoughlin, and anyone else who thought Graham and his ministry would fizzle out, were wrong. Although perhaps Graham had more fire in his ministry during the 1950s, Graham must have taken to heart the words of Christ and sown his seeds on good soil.<sup>22</sup>

Over these last fifty-five years Billy Graham has consistently worked to find new ways to relay his message. He built on precedent and the past mistakes of himself and others. He changed his script and performative technique to make sure no one would be offended by revivalist tactics. Finally, he used his celebrity as a bridge not to fame (although fame has come), but as a conduit to bring people into his tent to hear God's message. Furthermore, amid all the scandals, Graham has stood like an honest and humble giant standing against the forces of unbelief and misery. Whether this be

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<sup>21</sup> McLoughlin, 223.

<sup>22</sup> "A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown." (Matthew 13:3-8, NIV)

through his "Hour of Decision" radio broadcasts which, in their heyday, reached some 3000 radio stations around the world, his live crusades attended by hundreds of thousands of people, his television specials shown by almost 200 local television stations, his books and hundreds of other written offerings, the dozens of movies his production company made, the magazine, *Decision*, which still is the largest independent magazine in the world, or the thousands of accolades or millions of converts -- his life work touched the lives of others. To study Billy Graham is to study religious performance, popular theology, fashionable media forms, and ourselves as Americans, for it is with Billy Graham's life story that these things changed and, in many ways, became what they are today.



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