

When the Holy Spirit moves – Part 9

Throughout this series we have been looking at city-wide and nation-wide revivals down through the years as we have seen what happens when the Holy Spirit moves in power through a region or even a whole nation. In last week's sermon we were reminded what can happen when the Holy Spirit moves in and through the life of just one, surrendered, passionate, committed and called disciple who embraces the Great Commission personally and for their entire life. Last week we looked at the life and ministry Reinhard Bonnke and his incredible evangelistic impact particularly on the African continent over many decades until his passing a few years ago.

Today I want to conclude this series by looking at another single person whom God used in a truly amazing way for well over 60 years. He is perhaps the most recognised and respected Christian preacher of all time and a man whose impact on the Kingdom of God and this whole world is really beyond measure. Of course I am talking about Rev. Billy Graham. Even a cursory glance at the life of this country boy from the American South will demonstrate how wide and broad and deep the impact of just one person can be in our world when the Holy Spirit moves in them and through them over so many years.

Billy Graham was born on November 7, 1918 in Charlotte, North Carolina. He was the son of a prosperous dairy farmer. In 1934, while attending a revival meeting led by the evangelist Mordecai Ham, Billy had a significant spiritual awakening and he professed his acceptance of Christ and the salvation He offered mankind by His grace. In 1936 he left his father's dairy farm to attend Bob Jones College then located in Cleveland, Tennessee, but stayed for only a semester because of the extreme fundamentalism of the institution. He transferred to Florida Bible Institute (now Trinity College), near Tampa, graduated in 1940, and was ordained as a Southern Baptist minister. Convinced that his education was deficient, however, Graham enrolled at Wheaton College in Illinois. While at Wheaton, he met and married (1943) Ruth Bell, daughter of L. Nelson Bell, a missionary to China.

By the time Billy Graham graduated from Wheaton in 1943, he had developed the preaching style for which he would become famous - a simple, direct message of sin and salvation that he delivered energetically and without condescension. "*Sincerity,*" he observed many years later, "*is the biggest part of presenting anything, especially the Christian plan of salvation.*" After a brief stint as Pastor of Western Springs Baptist Church in Chicago, Graham decided to become an itinerant evangelist. In 1945 he joined the staff of a new organization called *Youth for Christ* and in 1947 he served as president of Northwestern Bible College in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Graham's emergence as an evangelist came at a perfect time for 20th-century Protestants. At that time Protestantism in America was deeply divided as a result of controversies in the 1920s between fundamentalism and modernism (a movement that applied scholarly methods of textual and historical criticism to the study of the Bible). In response to these controversies, most fundamentalists withdrew from the established Protestant denominations, which they regarded as hopelessly liberal, and retreated from the larger society, which they viewed as both corrupt and corrupting.

Although Graham remained theologically conservative, he refused to be sectarian like other fundamentalists. Seeking to dissociate himself from the image of the stodgy fundamentalist preacher, he seized on the opportunity presented by new media technologies, especially radio and television, to spread the message of the gospel.

In the late 1940s Graham's fellow evangelist in Youth for Christ, Charles Templeton, challenged Billy to return to seminary with him so that both preachers could shore up their theological knowledge. Graham considered the possibility at length, but in 1949, while on a spiritual retreat in the San Bernardino Mountains of southern California, he decided to set aside his intellectual doubts about Christianity and simply "preach the gospel." After that retreat, Graham began preaching in Los Angeles, where his crusade brought him national attention. He acquired this new fame in no small measure because newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst, impressed with the young evangelist's preaching, instructed his papers to promote Graham.

The huge circus tent in which Graham preached, as well as his own self-promotion, lured thousands of curious visitors - including Hollywood movie stars and gangsters - to what the press dubbed the "canvas cathedral" at the corner of Washington and Hill streets. From Los Angeles, Graham undertook evangelistic crusades around the country and across the world, eventually earning international renown.

Despite his successes, Billy Graham faced criticism from both liberals and conservatives. In New York City in 1954 he was received warmly by students at Union Theological Seminary, a bastion of liberal Protestantism; nevertheless, the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, a professor at Union and one of the leading Protestant thinkers of the 20th century, had little patience for Graham's simplistic preaching. On the other end of the theological spectrum, fundamentalists such as Bob Jones, Jr. and Carl McIntire, never forgave Graham for cooperating with the Ministerial Alliance, which included mainline Protestant clergy, in the planning and execution of Graham's crusade at Madison Square Garden in New York in 1957. Such cooperation, however, was part of Graham's deliberate strategy to distance himself from the starchy conservatism and separatism of American fundamentalists. His entire career, in fact, was marked by a spirit of reconciliation and cooperation.

Billy Graham enjoyed close relationships with several American presidents, from Dwight Eisenhower to Barack Obama. Despite claiming to be apolitical, Graham became close to Richard Nixon, whom he had befriended when Nixon was Eisenhower's vice president. During the 1960 presidential campaign, in which Nixon was the Republican nominee, Graham met in Montreaux, Switzerland, with Norman Vincent Peale and other Protestant leaders to devise a strategy to derail the campaign of John F. Kennedy, the Democratic nominee, in order to secure Nixon's election and prevent a Roman Catholic from becoming president.

Although Graham later mended relations with Kennedy, Nixon remained his favourite politician; indeed, Graham all but endorsed Nixon's reelection effort in 1972 against George McGovern. However, as Nixon's presidency unraveled amid charges of criminal misconduct in the Watergate scandal, Graham reviewed transcripts of Oval Office tape recordings subpoenaed by Watergate investigators and professed to be physically sickened by what he heard from someone he had considered his friend.

Graham's popular appeal was the result of his extraordinary charisma, his forceful preaching, and his simple, homespun gospel message. Behind that simple message, however, stood a sophisticated organization, the *Billy Graham Evangelistic Association* (BGEA), incorporated in 1950, which performed extensive advance work in the form of media coverage, cooperation with political leaders, and coordination with local churches and provided a follow-up program for new converts.

BGEA also distributed a radio program, *Hour of Decision*; a syndicated newspaper column, *My Answer*; and a magazine called *Decision*. Although Graham pioneered the use of television for gospel purposes, he always shied away from the label 'televangelist.' During the 1980s, when other television preachers were embroiled in sensational scandals, Graham remained above the fray, and throughout a career that spanned over half a century few people ever questioned his integrity.

In 1996 Billy Graham and his wife received the Congressional Gold Medal of Honor, the highest civilian award bestowed by the United States, and in 2001 he was made an Honorary Knight Commander of the Order of the British Empire (KBE). Graham concluded his public career with a crusade in Queens, New York, in June 2005.

Billy Graham preached in person to more people than anyone else in history. His evangelical crusades around the world, his television appearances and radio broadcasts, his friendships with presidents, and his unofficial role as spokesman for America's evangelicals made him one of the most recognized religious figures of the 20th century.

The sheer magnitude of Billy Graham's ministry and impact in our world can be seen by reviewing his incredible list of crusades and missions around the world. His very first crusade was in Grand Rapids, Michigan in September 1947. Like most of his crusades this was not a one-off event. It ran for nine days. This was followed only a few weeks later with a 14 day crusade in Billy's home town of Charlotte, North Carolina. Billy set a slow pace at first with only two crusades the following year and then four in 1949. But from 1950 – 1953 Billy held 24 crusades, each spanning more than a week and he also hosted 6 tours in which he covered multiple cities in a region or state. Up to that point, all of these Crusades had been across America.

It was in 1954 that Billy decided to take his ministry to the world. He began with a monster crusade in London which ran from 1st March to the end of May. He followed this with a massive tour through the Netherlands, Denmark, Finland, Sweden and France, before returning to the USA for a tour of the whole west coast and two Crusades in Nashville and New Orleans.

In 1959 it was Australia's turn with a month-long crusade in Melbourne in February/March, a month in Sydney in April/May, then Perth, Brisbane, Adelaide and Canberra. The impact of Billy Graham in our nation alone is incredible. If I had walked into any congregation in our nation during the 1960's and asked for a show of hands of all those who came to Christ through Billy Graham's ministry in 1959, there would be very few Congregations with no hands raised.

The pace which Billy Graham set was beyond what most people could do. Admittedly he had a great team behind him but he still had to stand up at every meeting and deliver the goods. It was Billy Graham that people came to see and hear. After an incredible year in Australia and New Zealand, the following year (1960) was by far the biggest commitment Billy had made to date. He held 29 Crusades across Africa, South America, West Germany, Switzerland and America.

This pace continued year after year after year – without a break. We were blessed to have Billy come to Australia again in 1979. Just a few years later he broke all records when in 1982 he hosted 32 separate Crusades across America and Europe. Of course as the years rolled by, Billy's age and energy levels saw the number of Crusades reduce and from 1998 onwards he was only doing two major missions each year and then in 2005, this incredible Evangelist, led his final Crusade in New York at the age of 87. His work ethic and commitment to the gospel was second to none!

So in total, Billy Graham held 417 separate crusades spanning an incredible 58 years. Some of those were tours which involved many smaller crusades across a region and the average length of his normal Crusades over almost six decades was 7-10 days. So in terms of individual meetings / rallies at which Billy Graham preached and led people to Christ, we are talking in excess of 6,000. This country boy from Charlotte, North Carolina reached in excess of 210 million people in over 185 countries and territories on six continents and that does not include the millions more he reached through radio, print and television and now the internet.

Billy Graham's first crusade in Grand Rapids, Michigan in 1947 lasted 9 days and had 6,000 people attend. His longest Crusade was in Madison Square Garden in New York ten years later. While ever the people kept coming, Billy kept preaching - every night for 16 weeks! In Moscow in 1992 there were over 150,000 people at his Crusade and over a quarter of them came forward to accept Christ at the end. The largest crusade in terms of people present at one time was held in Yido Plaza in Seoul, South Korea in 1973. Over 1.1 million people came to hear Billy Graham preach.

What an incredible ministry. What an incredible legacy. What an incredible testimony to what the Holy Spirit can do in and through one called, convicted, surrendered, passionate disciple. In 2018, when the news broke of the death of Billy Graham, the most influential Christian evangelist of the twentieth century, scholars and admirers began asking: "Will there ever be another Billy Graham?" Sadly the consensus seems to be "no."

Scholars note that evangelical Christianity and our dominant media culture are both too diverse for anyone to take on a singular role like Billy Graham's again. Admirers contend that Graham's relentless devotion to Christ and to the gospel also made him a unique figure in Church History. Of course if Billy Graham was around to hear this discussion, I am confident he would remind us all that God made him into the titanic figure he was. So if God chooses to raise up "another Billy Graham," then that is what He will do. But commentators on Graham's uniqueness are missing another point. Some scholars say that our media environment is too dispersed for someone like Graham to capture its attention. But we could turn that argument on its head. Perhaps all we need is another evangelist with Graham's hard work and savvy for tomorrow's media, and he or she could become as influential as Graham. Such savvy presumes a forward-looking, entrepreneurial aptitude. We don't know what a future Billy Graham would look like. Great entrepreneurs are hard to anticipate.

Graham's success was built in part upon his remarkable endurance and his shrewd use of the latest communication techniques, most notably broadcast television. He also caught the attention of titans such as William Randolph Hearst, who catapulted Graham to fame through secular media outlets, including the top magazines and newspapers of the day. In his adept use of media, Graham followed in the footsteps of George Whitefield, who was the Billy Graham of the eighteenth century. Whitefield would surely have reached Graham's hundreds of millions of people if he had television, airplanes and sports arenas at his disposal. As it was, Whitefield became the best-known individual in eighteenth-century Britain and America before the American Revolution.

A future Billy Graham would face more challenges than just a fractured media. He or she would face an English-speaking world that no longer necessarily believes that Christianity is a constructive force. Graham and Whitefield were both products of a culture that assumed Christianity's established status, either by fact or by law. Whitefield was a Church of England minister seeking to awaken the culture of Anglo-American Christianity. Whitefield ministered in a Christian culture, but he rejected the spirit of nominal Christianity that such a culture bred. He told people that it was not enough for them to respect the church. They could not depend on their parents' faith or their baptism to save them. They needed the "new birth" of salvation, as described in the Gospel of John, chapter 3, and other parts of the New Testament.

This message of the new birth through Christ has been the hallmark of the evangelical movement since at least the time of Whitefield. However the term "evangelical" has become confused and diluted in popular usage today. Listening to the American media, one could easily get the impression that "evangelical" just means a religious white Republican. Although both Whitefield and Graham had political opinions, no listener would have left their sermons confused about what the "gospel" was. The Son of God offered forgiveness and new life to all who received Him as Lord and Saviour.

Evangelical-style faith was the de facto established religion of Graham's native South in the early- and mid-twentieth century. Graham's travels took him to places such as the Soviet Union, where faith was hardly assumed and he did reach many people who had little background in faith. But Graham's greatest impact was naturally on his home turf, in areas of the South and Midwest that already had a pervasive Christian culture.

Graham helped untold millions of Americans who already respected Christianity to come across the threshold of personal faith, and to be born again. President George W. Bush is perhaps the best-known example. Bush, who had struggled for years with alcohol abuse, said that a mid-1980s conversation with Billy Graham about God's grace led him to recommit his heart to Jesus Christ.

A future Billy Graham will not be able to assume as much as Graham or Whitefield could about people's familiarity with the Bible or theology, or about their sympathy for the gospel. So a future Billy Graham will take cues from the Apostle Paul and his outreach to ancient pagan culture. Christian evangelists will increasingly find themselves, like Paul in Athens, accused of "advocating foreign gods," because he preached Jesus to them, and the resurrection" (Acts 17:18).

In post-Christian Western culture, the gospel will seem odd. It will need to be framed in terms that outsiders can understand, without compromising theological integrity or the sharper edges of Christian doctrine. Christians will also need to manifest loving community and family wholeness, which our broken culture desperately needs in the wake of the sexual revolution. Ordering your life around the Lordship of Christ will increasingly seem a strange alternative for a select few, rather than a natural step for responsible people entering adulthood.

C. S. Lewis offers a modern example of effective evangelism in an unchurched world. To be sure, Lewis spoke to a nation with a legally established Church in World War II - era Britain. And he did find a platform on government-run BBC radio for the series of talks that became his book: *Mere Christianity*. But Lewis did not begin from an assumption that Britons intuitively saw that Christianity was desirable, or that it even mattered. Instead, he persuasively and intelligently argued that Christianity was true, and that it demanded a response. He also used science fiction and children's stories as literary bridges to explore age-old questions about sin, forgiveness, and reconciliation with God. Those books surely reached many for whom straightforward Christian preaching seemed irrelevant.

Of course, historic evangelicals believe that we'll always need evangelism for both the churched and the unchurched. Billy Graham illustrated how you can do both, and he knew how to modulate his presentation depending on whether he was in Michigan or Melbourne or Moscow. So if a future Billy Graham does speak before unconverted people, he or she will most likely not lead with the exhortation, "*You must be born again,*" but rather with the question, "*Why does Christianity matter?*"

So maybe there will be another Billy Graham, but he or she will undoubtedly speak in a different cultural mode and use different media than Graham did. As Graham would remind us, however, God also has a long track record of using people who rely on Him, who work hard and use entrepreneurial ministry methods, and who stay faithful to the traditional teachings of the Church. We need not worry about who will fill his shoes, then. If the Kingdom of God requires it, God will most certainly raise up another Billy Graham.

Now of course, like all the revivals we have studied in this teaching series, the worldwide impact which Billy Graham had over this six decades of ministry was only possible because there were literally millions of people praying before, during and after every Crusade.

In fact, Billy Graham's commitment to see local people in prayer long before he rolled into town saw a huge pre-evangelism ministry develop. In fact, in the second half of Billy's ministry he would refuse to hold a crusade in a city or region unless the Body of Christ had already been mobilized in prayer and trained in follow-up for new believers. So whilst the spotlight was on one man when the Crusades began, the real power flowed from and through the ordinary people in Churches of all sizes and denominations – on their knees in prayer, months before the gospel was preached.

Billy Graham knew that God gave us a promise many, many years ago and it has not changed or been withdrawn. We have read these words many times in recent days and I hope we continue to read them. 2 Chronicles 7:14 continues to lie at the heart of every major move of God throughout history. God said it very clearly:

"If my people who are called by my name will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, forgive their sin and heal their land."

Behind, beneath and within every revival in human history we see this promise of God being played out. **God will heal our land when we, His people, respond to His call and embrace His promise.** Will there be another John Wesley, George Whitefield, Reinhard Bonnke or Billy Graham? That all depends on you and me and all those who claim to be disciples of Jesus and the people of God. Are we prepared to pay the price for the next mighty move of God? Are we prepared to pray, and I mean really pray, day and night for as long as it takes, for the Holy Spirit to move in our land, in our city, in our Church fellowship, indeed - in our own hearts? I guess only time will tell.

Come, Holy Spirit of God, speak to us now. Amen.