

SINNERS IN THE HANDS OF A LOVING GOD

Why a fiery evangelist changed his emphasis.

BY ANDREW S. FINSTUEN

BILLY GRAHAM debuted on a national stage during his Los Angeles crusade in fall 1949. Just 30 years old, Graham met his audience with a fiery call for repentance from sin, boldly announcing on the opening night that “this city of wickedness and sin” had a choice between revival and renewal—or judgment. At first, Los Angeles responded rather coolly to Graham’s ire. But after a publicity boost from news magnate William Randolph Hearst, Graham’s crusade entered its “5th Sin-Smashing Week!” A week later, the “Canvas Cathedral” overflowed as Graham presided over the “6th Great Sin-Smashing Week!”

Graham was no false advertiser. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, when the sawdust settled some 6,000 souls had either “reconsecrated their lives” or converted to a life in Christ, “weeping forgiveness for their sins.” Their tears were understandable since, according to Graham, they had narrowly missed hellfire and damnation. “Those who reject Christ,” Graham bellowed in an early sermon, “will be cast into the lake of fire and brimstone to spend eternity.” He emphasized the point even more vividly in a sermon about Judgment Day. Upon Jesus’ return, Graham warned, he would condemn

the unrepentant with “fire coming from his eyes,” and a “sword coming from his mouth.” The young evangelist rounded off the theme of condemnation near the end of his crusade with a recitation of Jonathan Edwards’s “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” Such firebrand sermons produced restless nights among some audience members, forcing Graham to employ a “swing shift” evangelist to handle decisions for Christ motivated by nightmares of a terrifying Jesus and a wrathful God.

Along with the thousands who turned to Christ, Graham’s life and evangelism were never the same after Los Angeles. Virtually overnight he went from a well-known minister within the evangelical subculture to a nationally recognized preacher. Amidst a deluge of media coverage, an editor at *Life* captured the transformation simply but presciently: “A New Evangelist Arises.” Graham’s meteoric rise to prominence awakened him to the burden and responsibility of his national role. That his sermons were scrutinized by the press and analyzed by “hundreds of clergy, laymen, and theologians throughout the world,” Graham recalled later,



INSET PHOTO: BGEA / GRAHAM PHOTO: B. BEITMANN / CORBIS

“baffled, perplexed, [and] frightened” him. Consequently, the Los Angeles crusade was the beginning of the end of the “turn or burn” style of preaching that had characterized many of his sermons there.

If the 1949 campaign marked the beginning of a shift in his preaching tone, the end came a decade later. Graham announced in a 1960 *Christian Century* article, “What Ten Years Have Taught Me,” that he centered his message on the Cross and its dual revelation of the “sins of men” but also the “unwearying love of God.” Four years later, in 1964, he confirmed the tonal change of his evangelism, remarking, “I stress a great deal the love of God from the Cross saying to the whole world, ‘I love you, I love you, I will forgive you.’”

What about the intervening years caused this shift in emphasis? In the space of a decade, Graham had become the most renowned evangelist in the world, magnifying a hundred-fold the burden he felt after Los Angeles. With an audience numbering in the millions, Graham understood that his words had the potential to alienate as much as invite untold numbers around the globe. Accordingly, while the theme of repentance was as strong as ever, he curbed excessive references to the flames of hell. More importantly, Graham, as the title of his *Century* article suggested, adopted the posture of a student.

What of Hell?: Graham’s early sermons warned of damnation, but by the 1970s Graham was under fire from supporters after he was quoted as saying he no longer believed “that pagans in far countries were lost if they did not have the gospel of Christ preached to them.”

Lacking a formal theological education, he hungrily studied the Bible and theology and realized more fully that the gospel really was good news to those “lost and confused and frustrated about purpose and meaning in life.” Practical experience also pushed Graham toward his revised message. His wide travels schooled him in the vast diversity of “the family of God” and further convinced him of the need for Christians of all stripes to “love one another.” Finally, Graham studied his audience and recognized that he ministered to a population—especially in America—beset by doubt, loneliness, and unhappiness during an era known as the “Age of Anxiety.” In light of such malaise, Graham adjusted his message to fit the concerns of his constituents, promising an “age of grace” for those who would turn to Christ.

Graham’s greater assurances about the love of God transformed his evangelism in his attitude toward sin, social crises, and ecumenism. With the love of God at the center of his message, Graham spoke more often of sin as the condition of all humanity, as opposed to sin as particular transgressions of one kind

or another. This distinction crystallized for him as he recognized that God’s loving sacrifice of Jesus at the Cross was meant to “deal with sin and not just individual sins.” Graham’s decreasing emphasis on a gospel of good behavior strengthened his commitment to a social gospel. Make no mistake, Graham never wavered in his primary mission to bring individuals to Christ. But he worried less about—as he preached in 1949—“the sins of the Sunset Strip,” and more about social problems, including racism, AIDS, and poverty. Finally, Graham’s ecumenical spirit deepened and broadened. He refused to speculate about the fate of non-Christians, and offered that “the love of God is absolute . . . and I think he loves everybody regardless of what label they have.”

The legacies of Graham’s ministry are many, but perhaps none is greater than its demonstration that it is not the flames of hell but the triumphant love of God that defines and emboldens a Christian life. **CT**

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'LITTLE GIRLS NEED THEIR DADDY'

Billy's children are thankful for their father; they just wish he'd been around more.

BY KERI WYATT KENT

WHEN FRANKLIN Graham was five, his famous father was in Australia for six months preaching at a Billy Graham crusade. Like many youngsters, "I'd wake up in the morning, go down the hall and crawl into bed with

Mama," Franklin says. "Well, one day I went in and Daddy had come home. So here he was, this man in her bed. I asked Mama, 'Who's that?'"

Billy's children say that his frequent extended absences marked them, but so did his unconditional love. While he sometimes chose ministry over family, they also knew that he loved them deeply and unconditionally.

The Graham children have both struggled and triumphed. Three out of the five have been divorced; both boys openly rebelled. All of them wrestled with simply being the offspring of the 20th century's most famous evangelist.

Today, the Graham children are all engaged in full-time ministry, but more importantly, they respect and honor their parents. As adults, they look back on their peculiar childhood through the lens of grace.

The eldest, Gigi Graham Foreman, has written seven books and is a sought-after speaker. Anne Graham Lotz runs AnGeL

Homecoming: Ruth and the daughters (then 8, 6, and 3) greet Billy on the deck of the Queen Mary as he returns from his 1954 preaching tour of Britain and Europe. He'd been gone five months.

NO FIGUREHEAD FOUNDER

To glimpse Graham's dynamic leadership style, look no further than his founding of Christianity Today magazine.

BY HAROLD MYRA



BILLY GRAHAM was the founder of *Christianity Today*. To most people, that fact brings little more than a shrug. Billy's biographers chronicle many significant achievements, and founding CT is one on a long list. But go back 50 years to the context in which he founded CT, and the case could be made that this particular achievement was both unique and improbable. How likely is the following scenario?

A young evangelist, best known for preaching to large crowds and often accused by academics and mainstream church leaders of oversimplifying the gospel, dreams of founding an "intellectually credible" publication. From a broad constituency of fundamentalists and evangelicals distrustful of scholarship, the 38-year-old evangelist convenes a diverse group of national leaders, including titans of business, renowned scholars, and influential ministers. Their goal: to produce a thoughtful publication rooted in historic Christianity to address "the current crisis." At its launch, they distributed it "fortnightly" to all clergy and theological students in the nation, gaining wide impact and recognition. It immediately exerts significant influence both nationally and internationally.

So what transformed Graham's improbable idea into a reality? Where did this self-described farm boy get the vision

and passion to launch CT, and how did he persuade so many to give so much to sustain it for the next five-plus decades?

THE MISSING RALLYING POINT

When the trustees of *Christianity Today* brought me on as ceo in 1975, I was aware of Billy's connection with the magazine but not his role as founder and sustainer. At that time, the magazine was in a financial crisis. The board realized that its hybrid nature—"intellectually credible" yet widely circulated—presented huge editorial and marketing challenges. Should its readership drift dramatically lower to concentrate on a smaller market?

We met as trustees in the Airlie Center in Virginia to evaluate CT's mandate. Harold John Ockenga was then chairman, although he often made it clear that CT was "Billy's magazine." Reaching deep into his battered brown briefcase, he searched for and finally surfaced his copy of Billy's original speech outlining the vision for CT. Ockenga stood and read the entire text.

As soon as he finished, one trustee exclaimed, "That's it!" Said another, "Remarkably prescient. That's still the essential CT, and should continue to be." For the next four decades, Graham's paper provided a detailed mandate for the magazine.

Where did that paper come from? In Billy's words,

About two o'clock one night in 1953, an idea raced through my mind, freshly connecting all the things I had seen and

pondered about reaching a broader audience. Trying not to disturb Ruth, I slipped out of bed and into my study upstairs to write. A couple of hours later, the concept of a new magazine was complete. I thought its name should be *Christianity Today*. I worked out descriptions of the various departments, editorial policies, even an estimated budget. I wrote everything I could think of.

Graham's idea that night was for a magazine that would "restore intellectual respectability and spiritual impact to evangelical Christianity."

His paper shows the intensity of his concern for Christian leaders in the 1950s. From his contacts with hundreds of clergymen, he concluded, "We seem to be confused, bewildered, divided, and almost defeated in the face of the greatest opportunity and responsibility possibly in the history of the church. . . . In a sense we are almost leaderless."

However, he also observed that most of the denominational and academic leaders in positions of power were on a different page. "Thousands of young ministers are really in the evangelical camp in their theological thinking and evangelistic zeal," Billy wrote. "I am convinced we are in the majority among both

Rallying Point: Graham meets with ct's first editor, Carl F. H. Henry, after the premiere of the first issue.

clergy and church members. However, we have no rallying point. . . . We need a new strong, vigorous voice to call us together that will have the respect of all evangelicals of all stripes within our major denominations."

Visions in the night of great enterprises are not unusual. But most of them end up in a file. Graham did not just talk about the concept or hand off his paper to others to implement. He took the point, personally taking on many of the countless challenges.

AN IRENIC ANTHROPOLOGIST

Graham was intellectually prepared. He often said later in life that he regretted not getting more education, but what he learned at Wheaton gave him insights and attitudes that would permeate his ministry. He was, against our intuitive expectations, an anthropology major. This gave him a spirit of inquiry rather than judgment about others, so he did not simply caricature liberals or critics but sought to understand and learn from them. Always downplaying his intellectual capacities, he was likely off the scale in emotional intelligence. Though Graham wasn't a scholar himself, his enormous respect for scholars and recognition of their influence in and outside the church was a crucial element in founding CT.

This is seen clearly in his relationship with the scholarly Ockenga, first president of Fuller Theological Seminary and pastor of Park Street Church in Boston. That Ockenga would