

## Significant Prayer Event #9 Forest Home Retreat Center, August, 1949

*My son, do not forget my teaching, but keep my commands in your heart,  
For they will prolong your life many years and bring you prosperity.  
Let love and faithfulness never leave you; bind them around your neck,  
write them on the tablet of your heart.  
Then you will win favor and a good name in the sight of God and man.  
Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding;  
in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.  
Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord and shun evil.*

Proverbs 3:1-7

For the ninth significant prayer event in United States history we move back six years in time from the kitchen table where Martin Luther King, Jr, had an encounter with the presence of Jesus Christ. I have felt justified in presenting these two events in reverse chronological order because the effects of the event I am about to describe came to full fruition later than the Civil Rights movement that Dr. King led.

The two events were similar in that both of them were the encounter of a single individual with God, private events that later had vast ramifications in the world. Both events involved one man coming to the conviction that Jesus Christ was with him and calling him to a particular mission; both events transformed postwar Christianity in America; and both events involved ordained Baptist ministers from the South who had been educated in the North. I have already described to you Martin Luther King Jr's "kitchen table" experience—our ninth event involves a crucial moment in the life of the greatest evangelist of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Billy Graham.

William Franklin "Billy" Graham was born in North Carolina in 1918 to a devout rural Presbyterian family. In 1934 Billy committed his life to Christ during revival meetings led by Mordecai Ham. Beginning to sense the stirrings of a call to ministry, Billy enrolled in the very conservative Bob Jones college, a school that was too straight-laced for him. He transferred to Florida Bible Institute (where he was baptized, twice, and was ordained as a Baptist minister). He graduated FBI and enrolled in Wheaton College, an emerging powerhouse among Christian Colleges, where he achieved a Bachelor of Arts with a major in Anthropology in 1943 and where he met and married Ruth Bell, the daughter of Presbyterian missionaries to China.

Already in Florida and later in Illinois, Billy Graham began to have a reputation as a gifted preacher. He was called to pastor a church while still a college student and while at his second church he began a radio ministry in the Chicago area, a program that featured George Beverly Shea as a soloist.

Billy did not last long in the pastorate. In 1945 Billy was invited to become Vice President of Youth for Christ and along with fellow evangelist and preacher Chuck Templeton (more about him later) began touring the country and eventually travelled to Europe. At Wheaton and in Youth for Christ, Graham grew beyond the parochial Christianity of the South and formed a network of friendships that would transform American Christianity.

But before Graham's career took off, he had a personal crisis to face. In 1947 Billy was invited to become the President of Northwestern College in Minneapolis, Minnesota. He was the youngest college president in the country, and with only a bachelor's degree, he felt himself one of the least educated. Billy's friend and fellow evangelist, Chuck Templeton, had also felt the lack of education and had resigned from Youth for Christ to enroll at Princeton Seminary. There his simple faith and message were challenged, and he in turn communicated to his friend Billy what he was learning.

Billy's desire to be respectable and educated led him to begin reading the great theologians of the day, men like Karl Barth and Reinhold Niebhuur who, while rejecting the liberalism that had gone before them, nonetheless had very nuanced views of Scripture and affirmed the value of critical (and sometimes skeptical) Biblical scholarship. Eventually, the crisis of faith brought on by theological investigation led Chuck Templeton to a loss of faith, and he ultimately became an avowed agnostic who returned to his native Canada to excel in television, journalism, and politics.

Before that happened, however, both Billy and Chuck were invited to Forest Home Retreat Center in California by Henrietta Mears, the legendary Christian Educator at Hollywood Presbyterian Church, to join other Christian luminaries in a youth event there. In his autobiography, *Just as I am*, Billy tells of his love and respect for Chuck Templeton and how his friend brought Billy's own spiritual crisis to a head by challenging his faith in the integrity of Scripture by saying, "*Billy, you're fifty years out of date. People no longer accept the Bible as being inspired the way you do. Your faith is too simple. Your language is out of date. You're going to have to learn the new jargon if you're going to be successful in your ministry.*"

Billy was indeed struggling with nagging doubts, not about the faith in general or the Gospel of Salvation in Christ: "*The particular intellectual problem I was wrestling with, for the first time since my conversion as a teenager, was the inspiration and authority of the Scriptures.*"

During the entire 20<sup>th</sup> century the issue of the authority of the Scriptures was the key shaper of American Christianity. In the previous century, German scholars had applied the scientific principles of the Enlightenment to the Scriptures and methodically reinterpreted them in the light of the modern conviction that Supernatural events are impossible. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century German scholarship jumped the Atlantic and became ever more influential in the major Divinity schools and seminaries. In the 1920's a conservative reaction set in that sought to affirm that certain supernatural claims made in the Bible were non-negotiables of the Christian faith. A series of tracts called "The Fundamentals" were written and widely distributed that affirmed as literal truth the Virgin Birth, the supernatural forgiveness of sins by Jesus' death on the Cross, His literal Resurrection from the dead, the bodily Second Coming of Christ, and the direct divine inspiration of the Bible. In the controversies that followed several northern Protestant denominations split-- most notably in the case of the Northern Presbyterians, the faculty of Princeton Seminary split and the conservatives left their school and denomination to found both the Presbyterian Church in America and Westminster Seminary.

In the wake of the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversies of the 1920's, the great institutions of American Christianity seemed to all inexorably move to the Modernist camp. While it is true that theologians like Barth and Niebhuur in the shadow of two World Wars were successfully able to challenge the Modernist notion of

inexorable human progress through science, they did not challenge the idea that the Bible is a pre-scientific document which cannot be received simply as reliable, factual or entirely trustworthy. Fundamentalists simply shook the dust off their feet and retreated to the backwaters of their own churches and schools, isolating themselves from the greater worlds of Academics, Politics, Science, Ecumenical Relationships, and cultural relevance.

Billy Graham desperately wanted to be relevant, and he was shaken to the core by Chuck Templeton's challenge that he could not hold to the complete truth of the Bible and be relevant at the same time. Henrietta Mears, however, did not share Chuck Templeton's convictions. She had private conversations with Billy at the very same event and shared her conviction that highest scholarship and respect for the Bible could go hand in hand. Billy felt torn. He felt urgently torn, since he was supposed to come back later in the same year to hold an evangelistic campaign in Los Angeles, and he felt that he could not in good conscience continue his evangelistic ministry if he could not believe the Word of God that he preached.

In his autobiography he tells about a solitary night-time stroll on the grounds of the retreat center. He recalls praying in the following way with an open Bible on the palm of his hand, which he could not read in the darkness: *"O God! There are many things in this book I do not understand. There are many problems with it for which I have no solution. There are many seeming contradictions. There are some areas in it that do not seem to correlate with modern science. I can't answer some of the philosophical and psychological questions Chuck and others are raising."* Then, in a moment which he would forever feel was at the Spirit's prompting, Billy blurted out to God, *"Father, I am going to accept this as Thy Word—by faith! I'm going to allow faith to go beyond my intellectual questions and doubts, and I will believe this to be Your inspired Word."*

It was a turning point, not only in Graham's life and ministry, but in the History of Christianity. What is remarkable about this prayer to me is its humility. Graham chose to embrace the Fundamentalist's assurance of the reliability of Scripture without having to embrace the Fundamentalist's conviction that every other means of discerning truth was wrong. Put a different way, Graham came to believe that the Bible is God's inspired Word but that his interpretation of it was fallible. Graham's genius, therefore, was the ability to preach the Gospel with heartfelt and simple conviction while at the same time being open to correction by and conversation with Christians, and even non-Christians of every stripe. The Fundamentalists had withdrawn from the culture—Billy Graham and the leaders of the new Evangelical movement of which he was the prime inspiration, engaged the culture in surprising and creative ways.

When Billy Graham returned to Los Angeles in late 1949, he was a phenomenon about to happen. William Randolph Hearst, the newspaper magnate, took a shine to the sometimes rash and naïve southern preacher, and ordered his editors to "Puff Graham." He quickly became a national sensation. In the 1950's the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association took both London and New York (citadels of modernism) by storm. In the 1960's and '70's Graham became an international figure, media star, and chaplain to presidents. All the time the basic message remained unchanged while the messenger grew and became wise enough to be considered a religious statesman.

In 1949 the decision to accept the authority of Scripture on faith meant the end of Billy Graham's academic career, because in his mind higher education meant traveling Chuck Templeton's route into skepticism. But Graham's continuing admiration led him to seek out people and to found institutions that could integrate respect for the Bible and serious scholarship. The contribution of Graham and his friends in this area cannot be calculated. He helped found *Christianity Today* (a serious Christian newsmagazine that is now the leading publication of its kind), two seminaries, a motion picture company, an evangelistic training center, a worldwide ecumenical movement known as the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, and perhaps his crowning achievement, the Congresses for Itinerant Evangelists in Amsterdam that brought simple preachers together from around the world. Through it all Graham continued to display an unwavering commitment to the truth of Scripture, to simple evangelism, and to the essential unity of the Church in its great diversity.

These commitments earned him the resolute opposition of the Fundamentalists, notably disavowal by Bob Jones, Sr, the president of Bob Jones University where Graham had studied. Many others, however, were inspired by Graham's vision and example to enter the worlds of politics, entertainment, academics and, yes, even religion to bear witness to Christ as faithfully revealed in the Scriptures. The result was so dramatic that by 1976 evangelicals elected one of their own, a born-again Sunday School teacher from Georgia, into the White House. By the 1980's and '90's the old-line Protestant denominations were waning, and evangelicals were in the ascendancy. Not every evangelical, of course, faithfully represented Billy Graham's humble willingness to be corrected. Graham did not endorse every "Evangelical" cause or agenda. Billy Graham himself, a good friend of Richard Nixon, learned the hard way through Watergate the dangers of a preacher getting involved in politics in support of a particular candidate or party.

Nonetheless, the man who, faced with a world that seemed to have no foundations or anchors, simply chose to believe in the Bible as the anchor that the world needed and preached its message of salvation in Jesus Christ with pure and heartfelt conviction. Billy Graham and the movement that had its spiritual beginning with that prayer at Forest Home with the faith and conviction expressed there, "*Father, I am going to accept this as Thy Word—by faith!*"—they changed the world.



In Christ, *Pastor David.*