

Lessons from Church History (Part 2)

WEEK 12: Lessons from Modern Evangelicalism

Billy Graham (1918-2018)

- Born in a farmhouse near Charlotte, NC in 1918, William Franklin Graham Jr. was the oldest of 4 children. Their family were dairy farmers and members in a local Reformed Presbyterian Church.
- When Graham was 16 he attended revival meetings led by evangelist Mordecai Ham and was converted to Christ. 2 years later, in 1936, he graduated HS and enrolled at Bob Jones College in Cleveland, Tennessee. Bob Jones Sr. was an evangelist who grew increasingly concerned with the secularization of higher education, particularly after the Scopes Monkey Trial.
- In 1937, Graham transferred to the Florida Bible Institute, was later ordained in 1939 by a group of Southern Baptist Clergy at Peniel Baptist Church, then graduated in 1940. Next, Graham enrolled at Wheaton College in Illinois where he also began to preach regularly at a nearby church. After graduation, Graham was invited to preach at Western Springs Baptist Church outside Chicago. In 1943 he married Wheaton classmate Ruth Bell, whose parents were Presbyterian missionaries in China. Within his circles, tensions were growing...
- At the first Youth for Christ meeting in 1944, Graham spoke to a crowd of 3,000 and saw 45 decisions made for Christ, which lit a fire in the blossoming evangelist.
- The fundamentalist movement took shape around two great controversies. The first was a struggle against religious liberalism for control of the main-line denominations. The Fundamentalists lost that fight generally everywhere (remember J. Gresham Machen). But as they exited the main-line denominations they built up a network of new institutions – schools, missions, book houses, agencies, radio ministries, and youth organizations.
- The second great controversy was a contest within the fundamentalist camp over neo-evangelicalism, or the new evangelical movement, arising in the early 1940's. This was a struggle for the soul of this fundamentalist network that had been established. Would they hold fast to their positions, excluding other believers (Biblical separation), or would they be willing to give in to ecumenism (the willingness to soften firm positions on doctrine for the sake of unity and inclusivism)?
- In 1947, neo-evangelicalism took a clearer formation with the establishment of Fuller Seminary and the launching of Christianity Today. Also, in September of 1947 Bill Graham held his first Crusade in Grand Rapids, Michigan with 6,000 people in attendance. He was only 28 years old, but he would have to start choosing sides in the growing controversy.
- Graham's early crusades generally consisted of a large venue seating several thousand people, a large choir, a clear Gospel presentation, then an invitation. These "inquirers" would speak with a counselor, have questions answered, pray, and often be provided with the Gospel of John or a study booklet.
- While conducting his crusades, Billy became President of Northwestern Bible College in Minneapolis in 1948. He was the youngest president of any college in the nation.

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- In 1949, Graham held a series of crusades in Los Angeles. Attendance was disappointing, until William Randolph Hearst used his newspapers to promote Billy Graham. Five weeks later nearly 350,000 people attended the tent revival in a parking lot and Graham was launched into national notoriety.
- Graham founded the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association (BGEA) in Minneapolis in 1950, the central organization of his outreach ministries, crusades, the Hour of Decision radio program, Decision Magazine, Christianity Today, and film and television broadcasts. More than 2 billion people would hear his message to put their faith in Jesus Christ for their salvation.
- In 1956-1957, Graham committed himself to cooperative (ecumenical) evangelism, declaring his position on the debate within fundamentalism. The issue came to a head in 1957 at the New York City crusade where he preached every night for 16 weeks! Jesus Christ was being lifted up to a full house in Madison Square Garden, to over a million people in four months. And on the platform with him were liberal Christians who didn't believe the doctrines Billy Graham was preaching.
- Graham preached at 417 crusades – 226 in the US, 195 in 50 other countries. In 1992 he preached to 155,000 in Moscow. 25% came forward at his altar call. He preached every night for 16 weeks in NYC in 1957 and the same for 12 weeks in London in 1954. His largest event in North America was in September of 1991 when he spoke to 250,000 in Central Park. It is estimated his crusades reached over 210 million people.
- During the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950's Graham became an increasingly strong voice for integration and took a strong stance against segregation.
- He famously tore down the ropes used to separate whites and blacks at a rally in Chattanooga Tennessee in 1953. He developed a close relationship with Martin Luther King, Jr.
- In 1973 he preached to 100,000 people. It was the first large mixed-race event in South Africa. Graham had refused invitations for years until officials finally agreed to an integrated event.
- Graham had a unique opportunity to minister to most every American President from Harry Truman to Barack Obama. He was particularly close to Nixon and Johnson.
- Graham authored over 30 books, many becoming bestsellers. His book *How to Be Born Again* set publishing history with a 1st printing of 800,000.
- Graham became an icon with nearly universal admiration, being featured on Gallup's list of most admired men more than anyone else in history. His life was virtually absent of scandal. In 1948 he established a code of ethics to protect against accusations of financial abuse, sexual sin, and abuse of power. The "Billy Graham Rule" became well-known. He would never travel, meet, or eat alone with any woman not his wife. He is the only minister to have a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.
- Graham was not perfect – but he was a godly man who devoted himself to proclaiming the message of Christ with a single-minded passion that left as large an impact on the evangelical world as anyone in modern times.