

With the end of the Exodus series, I have decided to do a short church history series, a brief summer diversion. My thought was to take significant figures from our heritage as Christians and highlight one each week, men and women who have very much shaped our present understanding of the teachings of the Bible (both negatively and positively). My thought is to survey their lives, tell their stories, and then explain how they have shaped Christian understanding.

Billy Graham
(1918-2018)



William Franklin "Billy" Graham
(7 November 1918- 21 February 2018)

Billy Graham was frequently honored by surveys, including "Greatest Living American", and consistently ranked among the most admired persons in the United States and the world. He appeared most frequently on [Gallup](#)'s list of most admired people. On the day of his death, Graham had been on Gallup's Top 10 "Most Admired Man" list 61 times and held the highest rank of any person since the list began in 1948.

I. The Outline of Graham's Life

A. His Earliest Years (1918-1943)

-Graham's heritage is that of Scottish immigrants that settled in the Carolinas before the American Revolution. Crook Graham, his grandfather, a Confederate war veteran, purchased land near Charlotte operating a small dairy farm. He had two sons, William Franklin and Clyde. He had no religious interests.

-Graham was born on the farm to William Franklin and Marrai. He is described as a prankster in youth and the quality of his early education was weak.

-The family attended an Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church and there his mother was converted in 1933. Following a life-threatening accident, his father professed Christ in 1934.

-Graham's parents allowed two itinerate evangelists (Mordecai Flower Ham and Walter Ramsay) to erect a tent in the farm pasture. He joined the choir to avoid seeing Hamm's pointed finger being under deep conviction with a friend Grady Wilson. As the choir say, "Just As I AM," he sat motionless; hearing "Almost Persuaded Christ to Believe," he went forward!

-Seeking to learn to preach, he entered Bob Jones College, Cleveland (TN), but did not return after a second semester, not liking the disciplined schedule)

-In 1937, he entered Florida Bible Institute, Tampa (FL). While there, prominent evangelists came (William Bell Riley, Gypsy Smith, Homer Roderheaver) and Graham felt the call of God to a ministry of preaching. (1938). He was subsequently baptized in nearby lake and ordained a Southern Baptist.

-While at the institute, he caddied on a golf course meeting the brother of a board member of Wheaton College. Paul Fisher, apparently financially secure, recognized his talent and zeal offering to pay for his education at Wheaton.

-He entered Wheaton in 1940 as a freshman with no credit for the four years elsewhere. He majored in anthropology and preached at youth meetings. Though offered Christian ministries, he stayed at Wheaton graduating in 1943.

-After Pearl Harbor, he sought to enter the chaplaincy but was told he needed to finish college, take a pastorate, or go a seminary for a year.

-In 1943 he married Ruth Bell in Montreat, North Carolina.

B. The Early Years of Ministry (1943-1951)

-After graduation he assumed the pastorate of the Western Hills Baptist Church outside Chicago. He also began assisting Torrey Johnson, the founder of the Chicago-Land Youth for Christ, joining George Beverly Shea, an insurance salesman.

-In 1944 he was commissioned a Second Lieutenant with orders to report to Harvard Divinity School. Interestingly, he got a case of the mumps. As he recovered, the need for chaplains decreased.

-He resigned Western Hills in 1945 to become the first field representative for Youth for Christ and travelled extensively in the states and Canada. At a meeting in Ashville (NC), he met Cliff Barrows, a graduate of Bob Jones College.

-In 1947 he became president of Northwestern Bible college, Minneapolis (MN), keeping a promise to William Bell Riley (d. 1947). Travelling continued, his family resided in Montreat; he led the school via phone. His heart was in evangelism, not the school though it prospered.

C. The Beginning of National Evangelistic Ministry (1949-1951).

-In 1949 (September-October) Graham led a team in what we now know as the Los Angeles Crusade; it would thrust him into national publicity.

*A maid in the home of William Randolph Hearst, the owner of newspapers across the country, invited him to hear a young preacher. He did not but sent a two word note to all his executives: "Puff Graham." From that, major articles appeared in *Time* and *Life* magazines detailing his ministry.

*Also, in those meeting three prominent celebrity-sorts came to Christ.

Stuart Hamblen, a western-type TV movie star.

Louis Zamperini, a war hero, Olympic track star, and then a broken derelict whose wife in desperation plead with him to go hear Graham.

James Arthur Vaus, a notorious racketeer with the Mickey Cohen gang.

-In December of 1949 Harold John Ockenga of Park Street Church invited him to Boston. He spoke to over 105,000 people on Boston Common and some three thousand came to Christ. Graham was then launched into a crusade-type ministry around the world.

- * In 1950, the "Hour of Decision," radio broadcasting (Ruth choose the title). The Billy Graham Evangelistic Assn. established.

- * In 1951, "World Wide Pictures" established.

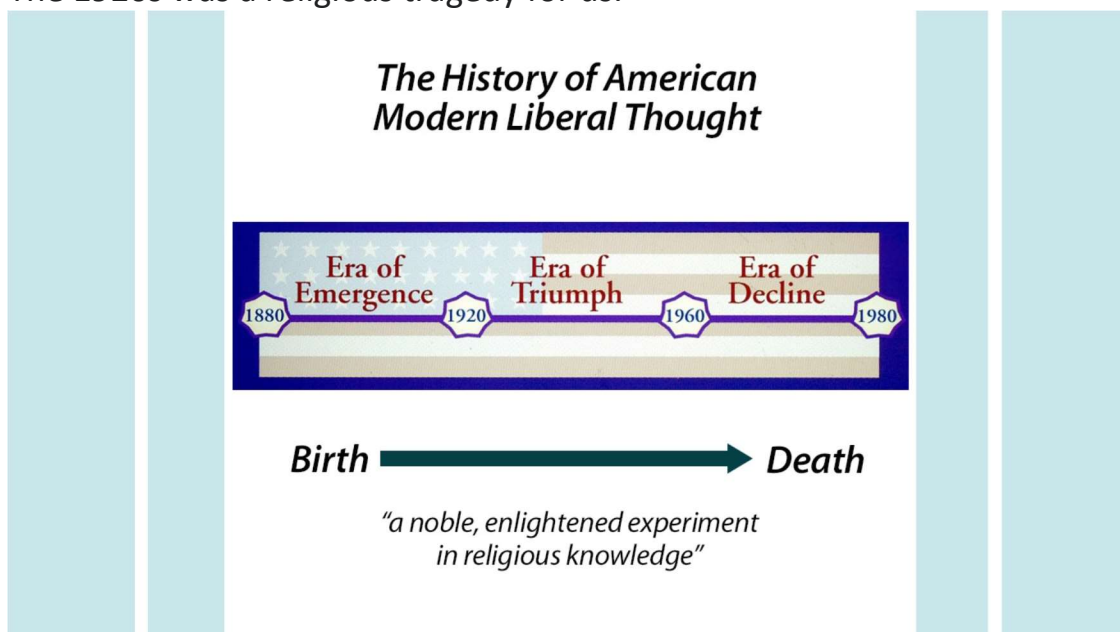
- * In 1952, "My Answer," a syndicated column, established.

- * In 1953, *Peace with God* published (1.25 million sold by 1965).

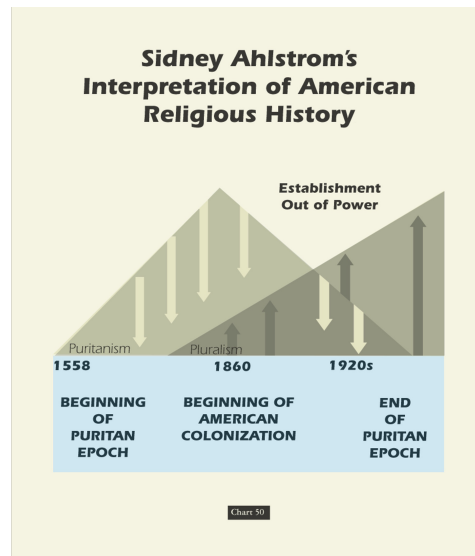
- * In 1954, London Crusade (over 2 million hearers, over 38 thousand conversions recorded).

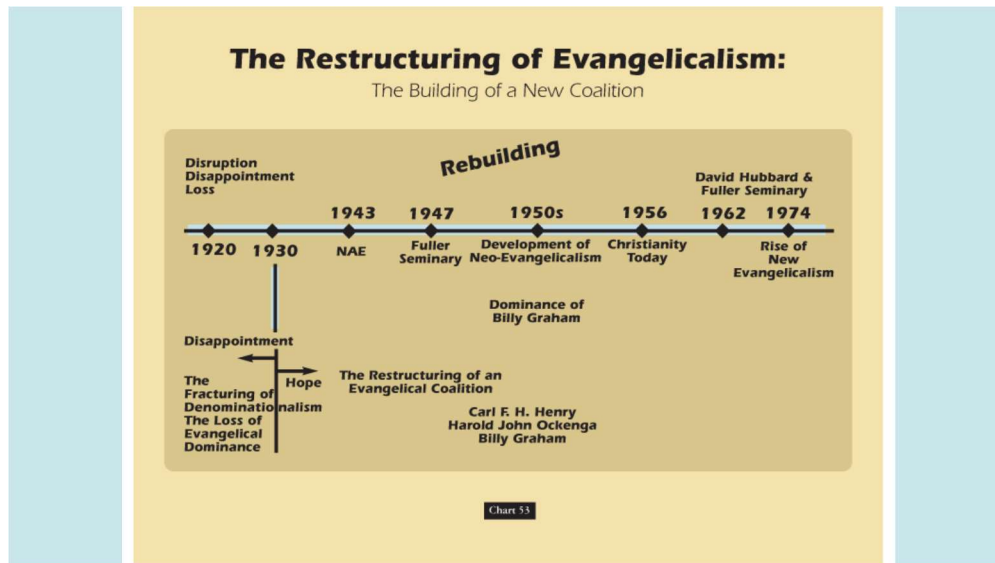
II. The Criticism of Graham and the Splintering of Fundamentalism (1950s-1960s)

A. In the late 1800s in this country, Liberal theological trends from Europe reached into the churches via our seminaries and other educational institutions. This brought a crisis and a division commonly designated as the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy that came into open conflict in the 1920's. The upshot was that the northern denominations with its schools and mission programs imbibed the Liberal re-interpretation of Christian Faith. For Baptists, Methodist, and Presbyterians it was a disaster. For the traditionally Orthodox, we were on the outside looking in, disenfranchised. The 1920s was a religious tragedy for us.



- B. In the 1930s and thereafter conservatives founded new churches, denominations, schools, and mission boards. Many in the 1940s sensed the need to re-invent.
- C. While the need to separate from Liberalism was evident, there was serious disagreement on how to do so. Differences of approach broke up the cohesiveness of the restructuring creating among us Fundamentalists, Conservatives, and even progressives (Militant Fundamentalists, Moderates, progressives). A common danger brings people together who may not agree later as they attempted to organize their own distinct identities.





Context: The Late 40's and the 50's was an era of both hope and uncertainty for significant segments of the evangelical, conservative Christians, particularly for those of us who read the Bible from a literal perspective believing that the "End of days" was immediately on the horizon.

- *In 1948 the World Council of Churches, a global organization that some feared would culminate in a One-World Church.*
- *On 14 May 1948 the nation of Israel was reborn which signaled to many that the eschatological clock was ticking, the regathering of a nation after centuries and the fulfillment of Prophecy.*
- *In 1949 China under Mao became a citadel of emerging Communism. In the Korean Conflict, US military engaged the Chinese in northern Korea.*
- *The end of the world war brought a new threat, the Soviet Union, that in Joseph Stalin and his nation, was the Anti-Christ. Some eschatologists argued that the Soviet Union was "the King of the North" that would invade Israel and bring us to Armageddon through the threat of global communism.*
- *While "In God We Trust" appeared on some coinage since the Civil War, it was placed on paper currency and coinage universally in 1955 by law to "serve as a constant reminder" that the nation's political and economic fortunes were tied to its spiritual faith." The phrase was declared to be our national motto!*

- *An international threat, our understanding of the prophetic timetable, and our revivalist heritage was the situation in which Graham came to national prominence. Some saw his ecumenical allowances as part of the threat, through Graham denounced the spread of Communism in the 1950s. (Many came to believe that every religious was a duped socialist/communist!).*

D. The catalyst for the disunity among Evangelicals was the events surrounding Billy Graham's spectacular crusade at Yankee Stadium in 1957. The issue was that of separationism versus cooperationism. What should the reaction be to those who continue cooperative programs with church bodies that are no longer Orthodox?

- Graham accepted an invitation from the Protestant Council of Churches which was predominantly Liberal and an affiliate of the National Council of Churches, representing 1,700 churches and 31 denominations in New York City and its environs.
 - The invitation came from a committee of 15 in the PPC that shared Graham's aims and outlook.
 - The messages delivered by Graham was control entirely by Graham himself and he did not alter his message of Christ's claims, person, and accomplishments.
- The crusade was conducted from May-September with enormous crowds and conversions.
- Many were horrified by Graham's affiliation within the evangelical, conservative, fundamentalists coalition with the PCC resulting in accusations and denigrations.

E. Graham came to feel that a broad base of religious affiliations was a key to the continuation of large crusades and massive attendance. In the Manchester, England, Crusade (1961), the local council of churches demanded several speakers (for example, George MacLeod, one of Grahams loudest British critics).

F. In the 1964 Boston Crusade, Graham took the position that a broad religious base was a prerequisite. He was welcomed with the blessings of Roman Catholic Cardinal Cushing.

(Thus, Graham's affiliations, not the message became the lightning rod for dissention. Was he compromising the gospel?)

III. The Character and Integrity of Graham, the Graham Ministry, and the Message

- A. The issue that caused the controversies in the Evangelical camp (now camps) was the supposed fear and threat of compromise. What can clearly be argued is that Graham never altered the message from the lectern in any of his crusades. He must have felt that in a declining religious world the importance of a wide base of support was important to reach the maximum of hearers.
- B. Graham's message has been built on the assumption that that Bible is absolutely, impeccably true. "The Bible is the constitution of Christianity . . . neither is the Bible of any private interpretation . . . the Bible includes all who live under its stated domain, without exception . . . the Bible is absolute . . . the highest law of God."
- C. Since 1954, the form of Graham's messages has essentially remained the same. The structure of his sermons is easily discernible whether his points are two or four. First, he shows the need of relationship to Christ (international chaos; man's quest of escapism, quoting numerous authorities) and second, he declares the way to have a relationship to Christ. The initial part of the sermon is aimed at arousing a sense of guilt, fear, or estrangement from God.

He could not be clearer in regards in his gospel than when he wrote in Peace With God (107): "Actually, Biblical conversion involves three steps—two of them active and one passive. In active conversion, repentance and faith are involved. Repentance is conversion viewed from its starting point, the turning from the former life. Faith indicates the objective point of conversion, the turning to God. The third, which is passive, we may call the new birth, or regeneration."

IV. Conclusions

- A. Graham's remarkable quality is that of integrity and fidelity to his calling. His decades of ministry are unsullied by any intrigue, whether it be moral, financial, or family (I would think that Ruth is an unsung "hero"). He did not allow his fame to change his character; what a remarkable gift from God as the pages of history are filled with people who allow success to make them unsuccessful. (Graham's salary was as an employee of the Evangelistic

Association that operated through a board and his employment was set at \$19,500.00).

- B. Though Graham was the confidant of presidents beginning with Truman and Eisenhower, but particularly with Nixon and Johnson, he did not allow his message to be shaped by any political agenda.
- C. Graham made the choice of seeking the widest possible audience; a choice that many found unacceptable. However, he accepted the idea that compromises must be made sometimes for greater opportunities in an imperfect world. The issue is: How do you compromise without compromising your true values and convictions? How do you separate the ancillary from the crucial? Do we not all make choices that others do not understand because they do not have a passion or desire for good that we might have? In a huge stage, our actions are known but not our motives; the result is often mistrust!!