



BILLY GRAHAM

Lessons I have learned

INTERVIEWED BY JOHN CAPON

As the universities of Oxford and Cambridge play host to Billy Graham this month, the years roll back to the mid-fifties when the famous American evangelist first took these ancient seats of learning by storm. It was in 1955, in the wake of his remarkable crusade at Wembley that year and at Harringay in 1954.

Twenty-five years ago he was little more than a brash young revivalist whose impact on the American Bible belt had caught the attention of British eyes who saw him as the answer to this country's spiritual post-war doldrums. Now he comes as a respected church leader, a man who has been seen personally by more people than anyone else in history, and who is almost a permanent resident in the annual list of America's ten most admired men.

Those years of transition from apprentice evangelist to Christian statesman have been more fully documented than those of any of his contemporaries. Hundreds of newspaper and magazine articles have probed and prodded, praised and ridiculed him. Last year alone in the USA six biographies of him were published. Fortunately only two of them have so far appeared in Britain.

The first was the second volume of John Pollock's 'authorised' version, of the years from 1969 to date. It is a painstakingly thorough account, but it has the feel of a news bulletin about it. It is full of information but short on analysis. It is also one-sided, with scarcely a hint of criticism. The resulting two-dimensional portrait is ultimately unsatisfying and incomplete.

The second biography has had rather more notice taken of it than Pollock's. It is by an American journalist Marshall Frady and is subtitled 'A Parable of American Righteousness'. With 546 pages it is more than half as

long again as Pollock's book, though much of the extra length could have been cut with profit. Page after page is cluttered with superfluous phrases which while demonstrating the breadth of Frady's vocabulary, tend to impede the flow of his argument.

His case is straightforward. Graham is just an old-fashioned hell-fire revivalist who by a series of lucky breaks and a great deal of hard sweat has been adopted by the American people as their collective religious mascot. Some reviews have claimed that Frady blames Graham for, in effect, sanctifying the not particularly praiseworthy standards of middle America and makes him the scapegoat for the country's post-Vietnam, post-Watergate disillusionment and its loss of moral leadership. Others feel the author is merely saying that Graham is no more than the mirror image of the 'plastic' American culture that has shaped him.

To support his contention Frady has travelled widely, conducted extensive research, interviewed the evangelist's relatives, friends and associates and drawn on his own Southern Baptist upbringing. The book is rich in anecdotes which make Graham a great deal more human and fallible than he seems from Pollock's account. The British publishers, who not only brought out the first volume of Pollock's biography of Graham but are also currently publishing some of Graham's own books, admit it was a book they 'nearly didn't publish', though they say that in their view he comes out of the

book 'very well, on the whole'.

It was natural therefore that when I met Billy Graham recently in London my first question was about Frady's book. He admitted he was only two-thirds of the way through it and had got 'rather bogged down'. Somewhat lamely, he says, 'I just haven't had the time.'

And what does he think of it so far?

'I think he knew what he wanted to prove before he started. Most of his quotations of me have to do with my sermons in the 1950s. I only met him three times. He was a charming man, but he didn't take a single note during our conversations, nor did he use a tape recorder, and from others I've spoken to I gather it was the same with them.' Graham has been quoted by an American newspaper as saying it was one of the most inaccurately researched books on him ever published.

One Canadian former evangelist, Charles Templeton, who features prominently in the early pages of the book is 'furious' at the way he was presented and is threatening a lawsuit against the author. 'I asked him not to. First, it would draw attention to the book. Secondly, I would be called to testify, and I have never been, nor want to be, involved in a court case. Our attorneys were very strong on this, but I said "Absolutely not. There's a reason for this. God has allowed it to happen".'

The American fortnightly *Christianity Today*, founded by Graham, but by no means his mouthpiece, devoted six pages to a fairly thorough demolition of Frady's book. It, too, was concerned at its accuracy. One anecdote was shown to be patently false, and substantial doubt was cast upon numerous other claims. Graham had not seen a copy of the magazine when he arrived in London late last year though he knew it was in the offing.

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TOP LEFT: With Cassandra of the Daily Mirror
BELOW LEFT: With David Frost
BELOW RIGHT: With Mohammed Ali and Mrs Ruth Graham
BACKGROUND: Hyde Park 1954



When I showed him my copy, he whistled: 'My word! They really gave it some space.'

Leaving aside Frady's main thesis, there seem to be three valid criticisms he makes of Graham. First, that he should have been more selective in the things he has said, the attitudes he has adopted and the people he has associated with in business, political and social life. If he had his time over again would he do things differently?

'I would be more careful. In those days I wasn't thinking about how it would be regarded in ten or 15 years' time. Take the matter of my association with eight US presidents during my ministry. I was thinking in terms of the possibilities of witness. I never initiated any of these meetings; it was always at their invitation — except for a couple of times when I phoned former President Nixon. But what people don't realise is that if you took all the time, I've spent with presidents in the past 40 years it would amount to less than two months. I spend 95 per cent of my time with ordinary people, which isn't news. But if I play a game of golf with Bob Hope, or Muhammad Ali comes to see me, that's a news event. People get the impression I spend all my time with such people.'

But is this not, I ask, because he has a very efficient public relations organisation . . . ?

He interrupts: 'I don't have a single person . . .'

'But we heard about that Muhammad Ali visit from your office,' I protest. 'Complete with photographs.'

'That is new for us,' admits Graham. 'For years we didn't send out any such pictures. All the publicity came from the other people concerned.'

I quote a passage from Frady's book which particularises the point at issue:

'Satan's last and most tantalising tempta-

tion of Jesus in the wilderness was to take him to a mountaintop and offer him the arrayed dominions and principalities of the earth — the temptation to fulfil his message, his kingdom, through the expediting devices of authority and government, so entailing him then in the instruments of temporal power and thereby negating his far more radical meaning of simple uninstitutionalised love.'

Frady claims that Graham succumbed to this temptation, initially seeing the patronage of the rich and the powerful as an opportunity to expand his ministry, but subsequently becoming 'entranced' by the trappings of success.

Graham dismisses the idea. 'The things Frady mentions or would know about aren't the temptations. The temptations were when a state governor called me when I was quite young and asked if I was willing to be appointed to the US senate; or when a former US president urged me to run for the presidency in the early 1960s; or when I was offered a place on the board of directors of the American Broadcasting Company at a fabulous salary. What Frady mentions didn't occur to me as temptations but as opportunities to witness for Christ.'

Was the problem perhaps more in the field of business and commercial interests?

'Which ones?' he retorts sharply. 'I've never met Mr Ford, for instance, nor the president of Chrysler, nor the chairman of General Motors' board. Or if I have it has only been as one of a number of top business executives presented to me at various functions. But not to be in their homes.'

I take up another of Frady's themes — that Graham is an innocent abroad in the mucky world of politics. How can someone identify with and thereby appear to approve of political practices which contradict the essence of

the Christian gospel — love, justice and integrity — whereas politicians . . .

He interrupts me again, this time with a smile. 'In other words,' he says, 'I'm eating with publicans and sinners?' But he goes on to admit that he has been 'really frightened' all his life of doing and saying something that would bring disrepute to Christ. 'Many times I've put my foot in my mouth,' he says, unconscious of this momentary literary lapse.

Frady has some harsh criticisms to make of Graham's 'hermetically-sealed' lifestyle, alternating between plush hotel suites and the comfortable sanctuary of his log cabin retreat in North Carolina. To this must be added the fact that he looks the epitome of success, well-dressed, well-manicured, healthy, prosperous. Does this not catch in people's throats when they relate it to the poverty we associate with Jesus — or the sacrificial frugality of, say, Mother Teresa?

'That is, may be a problem for people outside the Third World. You wouldn't find it in the Third World itself. This is something we are guilt-ridden about in the West and it's a bothersome area with me. The Holy Spirit has really been dealing with me and my wife together. We've spent a long time talking about it. We never gave it much thought in the 1950s and '60s, but in the early '70s, when it became a world discussion point, we began to realise our responsibilities as leaders in this area.'

He says that they have tried 'in some small areas' (with emphasis on the small) to change their own lifestyle, though he does not say how. They have tried to instil into their children the need for frugal living. One of their sons is currently a member of a medical team working in the Cambodian refugee camps in Thailand. Last summer he was helping to

pick boat people out of the South China Sea.

Graham supports 'quite largely' the arguments expounded by Ronald Sider in his book *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* and agrees with the Lausanne Covenant's call to Christians to adopt a simpler life style. But he will not be stampeded into asceticism: 'We look on this as something rather relative. In comparison to Bangladesh, people in London are very wealthy. But in comparison to some people I know in other parts of the world they would be considered poor.'

We discuss his penchant for making portentous announcements about the future — optimistic forecasts about the advent of revival, the major significance of a forthcoming crusade, warnings of growing secularisation and decadence, and predictions of imminent doom — which are seldom if ever fulfilled (though the fact that we met three days after the six-minute nuclear alert sparked off in the USA by a computer error gave pause for thought). Is there not a danger of crying 'wolf' too often? Has he learned any lessons here?

'I've learnt some, though I can't help but remember that Jeremiah predicted the destruction of Jerusalem for 40 years before it finally happened. They must have got awfully tired of him crying, "Wolf, wolf," and it didn't come.'

Then, with the practised ease of an experienced interviewee, he turns the question to good account, revealing his conversion to an anti-nuclear position far removed from his hawkish support of American military might in the 1950s and 1960s.

'I fear that unless the arms race is controlled, unless we move towards imposing a moratorium on all nuclear weapons, we're heading rather quickly towards an Armageddon — not necessarily the biblical one. The development of laser beams, modern submarines, the proliferation of atomic weapons in countries which do not have them at present, economic pressures due to the rising cost of energy — all these factors mean that unless we can reach some sort of agreement in the next five years, the world is in very serious trouble indeed. Christians must not just say "I'm for peace." They must work for it. That's why I've joined Senator Mark Hatfield in a call for a moratorium on atomic weapons, in the hope that we can mobilise public opinion. But it can't possibly happen yet. And in the meantime you can't preach the gospel today other than against a background of impending judgment.'

We move on to a subject which is something of a hot potato among many evangelicals in Britain at present — co-operation with Roman Catholics in evangelism. Shall we ever see the day when he will share his evangelistic platform with his new rival as a crowd-puller, Pope John Paul II?

By way of an answer, he traces briefly the pattern of Catholic support for his ministry from 1950, when Cardinal Cushing held a joint press conference with him and splashed the headline 'Bravo Billy' across the front page of his diocesan newspaper, to his visit in 1978 to Poland, where he participated in joint meetings with Catholics, Orthodox, Lutherans and Baptists.

'We were first invited by the Baptists, then

by the ecumenical council, and then the Catholic episcopate, including Cardinal Woytyla who became Pope, agreed to open their churches and cathedrals for me to preach in. On each occasion I had tea with the Catholic bishop (four days after I was due to see Woytyla he was made Pope); then in the meeting itself the Catholic bishop made his presentation from his usual place. He would be followed by the Orthodox, Lutheran or Baptist representative, after which I would get up and preach a regular gospel sermon, emphasising the personal relationship they could have with Christ in their daily life, giving a straight invitation to the predominantly Catholic congregation to come to Christ or renew their confirmation vows.'

But to which churches are Catholic enquirers — in Poland or anywhere else — referred?

'We leave that decision to each individual crusade committee, but we recommend they follow the wishes of each enquirer. Many Roman Catholics who come forward don't want to go back to their priests.'

He feels Catholic-Protestant relations have historically been better in the USA than in Britain. Even so it is a little surprising that he sees the problem in terms of Roman Catholics believing 'in the essentials of the Gospel;

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they add a little bit that we can't accept... Easier to understand is his wife's comment a few weeks ago, 'Do you realise we've never had an ugly letter from a Catholic?' Any such they do receive apparently come from Protestants.

We move on to discuss his future plans, and inevitably the question of a possible return to Britain for a major crusade in the 1980s. Last year, following a poll on the BBC's *Sunday* programme which produced the remarkable voting figures of 13,825 in favour of him coming back and only 1166 against, he gave a carefully worded interview which on the face of it seemed to exclude the possibility of a return visit. But closer examination revealed that he had left the door firmly ajar. He said he would consider an invitation by 'a responsible group of clergy and laymen', but would not come until 1982 at the earliest. How does he see things now?

'I'm not prepared to say at this stage that it's God's will for us to come back to Britain. If I did, it would be mainly to make religion a talking point. I don't think we could make the individual impact of earlier crusades. But I have to consider other priorities in other parts of the world — and I have a time limit now; I'm 61 and I feel it at times. I'm at the end of the busiest six months of my entire ministry and I'm really at the point of some

exhaustion.'

An influential body of opinion in Britain says 'Yes' to Billy himself but is unhappy about the style, content and personnel of his normal crusade. Would any new crusade sound like a re-run of Earls Court in '66 and '67 — or even Harringay '54?

Graham makes few concessions. Cliff Barrows must still be by his side, he insists, though Beverley Shea, now 71, might not make it. He claims there have been changes in the musical content of the meetings, with black singers and the likes of Johnny Cash, the preliminaries have been cut 'by 10-12 minutes' but they still exceed the 40-minute sermon in length. But he concedes that an observer would not notice much difference between now and Earls Court 14 years ago. This does not worry him unduly. Occasional preaching engagements at All Souls, Langham Place, and Emmanuel, Northwood, confirm his view that we still do things more or less the same way as he does.

One welcome change in his crusade content in the past two or three years has been the elimination of the celebrity spot where 'born again' beauty queens, baseball stars and other notable public figures have given their testimonies. He feels partly to blame for the way in which the 'born again' bandwagon has gathered momentum in the USA. 'We have put people up on the platform too quickly, before they've had a chance to grow. The Bible warns against using the novice. Now we ask ordinary people, housewives, labourers, and so on, to talk about their faith. People can relate to them more easily.'

During his recent London visit he met the new Archbishop of Canterbury, Robert Runcie, for the first time. He was 'tremendously impressed' by him: 'I feel sure he is probably the right man for the job.' Runcie heard Graham preach at Cambridge in 1955 when he was vice-principal of Westcott House (not, as he wrongly recalled in last month's *Crusade* interview, 'a critical ordinand'). He said that he had not been too happy with the way the evangelist had talked about sin. Has Graham changed his emphasis here?

'I don't talk about personal sins so much as I did. I tend to talk about sin, singular, in which I include the social, corporate sins. I also place much greater emphasis on the cost of discipleship and what is involved in following Christ than I did five or ten years ago.'

We return to the biographies with which we started. Which of them reveals the real Billy Graham? The answer is neither — and both taken together. Pollock is right in saying that in the past decade Graham has graduated to the role of world Christian leader. But Frady poses too many awkward questions for them to be dismissed — however inaccurate his research may have been.

To meet Billy Graham poses a dilemma for all but the most partisan among us. As a man he is transparently sincere, solicitous to a fault, unaffectedly ordinary. As even Marshall Frady found, it is difficult to have personal dealings with Graham without feeling a warm empathy for the man and his ministry. However, that on its own does not lay to rest the legitimate questions which Frady raised — but seems to have answered wrongly. ■