

Bill Bright and Campus Crusade for Christ: The Renewal of Evangelicalism in Postwar America

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In Review



Bill Bright and Campus Crusade for Christ: The Renewal of Evangelicalism in Postwar America

John G. Turner

If you're looking for a book that will either vilify or canonize Bill Bright and Campus Crusade for Christ, this is not the one for you. John Turner has crafted an honest account of one of the fastest growing and most influential religious movements of the last half century. A critical insider to parachurch evangelicalism, Turner participated in Young Life and InterVarsity while in high school and when he was a student at Middlebury College. His sister brought him to Campus Crusade events when he visited her at Cornell. At Notre Dame, where he pursued doctoral studies, he researched this book under the direction of George Marsden, whose work has prompted a number of young scholars to delve into the relationship between Christianity and American higher education.

Identifying himself as being somewhere between evangelicalism and the mainline, Turner sympathizes with the pious sincerity of parachurch evangelists, yet questions some of their methodologies, especially their penchant for interpreting numerical and financial growth as benchmarks of spiritual success. Bright exemplifies Turner's conception of the late-20th-century entrepreneurial evangelical leader as salesperson extraordinaire. Like R. Laurence Moore, Turner believes that Americans choose their religion in a diverse marketplace of vying alternatives, and he agrees with other historians that evangelicals have valued the pragmatism, charismatic leadership and ecclesiastical free enterprise that operates via nondenominational, ad hoc mission societies.

Turner explains that his book provides a window into an era because Campus Crusade has been among the largest and most visible of the parachurches, a centrist organization comprising evangelicalism's diverse wings. It has also demonstrated an amazing ability to adapt to the changing winds of popular culture and has influenced American public life in profound ways. Turner traces three particular areas in which Crusade has influenced U.S. society: on college campuses, in politics and in the debate over gender roles. He concludes that growing affluence and influence prompted parachurch evangelicals to simultaneously assimilate and resist, becoming cultural insiders and outsiders at the same time.

Chronicling the intertwined lives of Bright and Campus Crusade from their earliest days, Turner tells a story of rapid institutional expansion and growing prestige. Raised on his Republican father's Oklahoma ranch, Bright was dedicated to God by his Methodist mother after her previous baby was stillborn. An avid reader during

childhood, Bright graduated from college and headed to Los Angeles to seek his fortune. There he encountered evangelicals like Navigators leader Dawson Trotman, radio evangelist Charles Fuller and his son Daniel, and Henrietta Mears, the highly influential education director at the First Presbyterian Church of Hollywood. A fundamentalist who did not shy away from movies and popular music, Mears attracted a large following of bright and beautiful young adults who would become leaders in the post-World War II neo-evangelical movement. Bright personally converted after listening to one of Mears's talks. He emulated her evangelistic methods and followed her advice by enrolling at Princeton Seminary. But he did not finish his degree there or at his next school, Fuller Theological Seminary, because he believed that God wanted him to found an evangelistic campus ministry. One of his professors suggested the name Campus Crusade for Christ.

Bright, by now married to hometown sweetheart Vonette Zachary, and joined by friends from Fuller Seminary and the Presbyterian church in Hollywood, targeted the UCLA campus first, winning converts and participants among the school's nationally renowned football team. Here, Turner says, we find Crusade's true genius: Bright and his friends understood that most undergraduates experience the campus as a social rather than an intellectual center, and that higher education had not become secularized but instead had moved religion from the classroom to the periphery. So Bright took his crusade to the student activities sphere, soliciting leaders in student government, in sports and in fraternities and sororities—a tactic that within a decade produced almost 300 staff members on more than 100 campuses.

Turner offers noteworthy snippets of Crusade lore. Bright was always imparting the latest sales ideas to his staff and inviting motivational speakers to their training conferences. One speaker inspired Bright to compose a talk called "God's Plan for Your Life," which eventually morphed, with the editorial help of a Toledo businessperson, into the famous "Four Spiritual Laws" booklet. A Crusade board member suggested that the organization should not rely on "faith missions" for funding as prior evangelicals had. If staff raised their own support, Crusade could use other donations to foster institutional advancement. Taking a consulting firm's advice, it began appealing to donors by telling them that Campus Crusade could be their agent of mission enablement, through which they could share their God-given wealth.

Such innovative development strategies fueled increasingly bolder projects, including the purchase of the Arrowhead Springs resort headquarters, the founding

of a faculty ministry and Athletes in Action, and the massive Explo '72 conference. Expanding its efforts beyond college campuses, Crusade showed the film *Jesus* to millions worldwide, held conferences and founded mission centers and training schools internationally, and started its Christian Embassy outreach to elites in Washington, D.C. Hoping to evangelize the United States by 1976 and the world by 1980, Bright launched the “Here’s Life, America” and “Here’s Life, World” campaigns, reaching about 150 U.S. cities and over 100 countries by 1977.

Containing 21 photographs, the book is full of examples demonstrating Campus Crusade’s skill at adapting to the roller-coaster ride of campus life in the late 20th century. But its worldwide missions work eventually eclipsed its campus ministries in size and scope.

Late in his career Bright became an elder statesman, influencing President Reagan—whose pastor was one of the early UCLA football converts—to declare 1983 “The Year of the Bible” and, with Vonette’s help, to establish an annual “National Day of Prayer.” By the time of his death in 2003, Bright was a doctrinal nonpartisan, calling himself not an evangelical but instead a classical or New Testament Christian, and he was on friendly terms with Roman Catholics, Pentecostals and diverse other Christians with whom he had partnered around the world. The ministry he began is now the largest of its kind, with almost 30,000 staff members and annual donations of about a half billion dollars.

Turner concludes that Bright was far more involved behind the scenes in conservative politics than has been publicly acknowledged. Early in his career, like fellow neo-evangelicals, Bright motivated staff and donors by appealing to the fear of communists infiltrating Christian America as well as to the need to bring people to personal salvation. Turner argues that Bright’s leadership during a series of events in 1979 and 1980 was pivotal in cementing the new religious right’s ties with the Republican Party. Staff members recall that his memos about voting and social issues, though officially nonpartisan, always coincided with conservative views. Some Crusade staff began to wonder if increasing political involvement from headquarters might threaten the effectiveness of their foundational evangelistic mission. Yet all attest that every day Bright would stop whatever he was doing to talk with others about their Christian faith—his top priority was always concern for others’ eternal destiny.

Regarding gender roles, Turner concludes that Crusade maintained the complementarian stance it inherited from fundamentalism while gradually accepting some innovations prompted by the evolving feminist movement. Regarding leadership, Turner explains that there were occasionally major differences between Bright's vision and that of his colleagues and staff. It was not easy, Turner says, for a leader whom he calls a "hard-nosed autocrat and . . . tenderhearted evangelist" to discern the fine line between pursuit of big dreams and a crippling pride that causes an inability to listen.

As early as the late 1800s, pastors warned that parachurch campus ministries would hinder students' participation in existing congregations. Turner writes that early in Bright's career he had little faith in the ability of established churches to effectively disciple their converts. Despite the merits of helping irreligious students to become intentional followers of Christ, Crusade's way of doing campus-based church altered young adults' understandings in such a way that the older denominational congregations now appeared backward and culturally inaccessible.

Was parachurch evangelicalism a necessary corrective to the churches' missionary decline? Did Crusade and its peers drain churches of congregants and potential donors, hindering the churches' evangelistic efforts? The answers depend on one's assumptions and theological perspectives and on one's overall appraisal of Bright and Campus Crusade. This movement and its people, like all earthen vessels, have had their pros and cons. As Turner's book indisputably shows, the organization and its sky's-the-limit leader have profoundly changed the landscape of American Christianity and continue to have global influence as well.