

What ten years have taught me

A world-famous evangelist offers a personal account of the failures, triumphs and developments of mind and faith marking his career during the past decade.

by [Billy Graham](#)

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It was just ten years ago that my evangelistic work came to the attention of the church as the result of a Los Angeles crusade. To me it was like a bolt of lightning out of a clear sky. I was bewildered, challenged and humbled by the sudden avalanche of opportunities that deluged me.

I was bewildered because I had no formal theological training. I had never been to seminary; in college I had majored in anthropology. I was challenged because I saw new doors of opportunity swing open, doors which could conceivably provide new occasions for glorifying God. I was humbled because it seemed that God was laying his hand on the most unlikely prospect among his servants for a gigantic task. I did not ask for the assignment that was pressed upon me by a sovereign God. I had not anticipated or aspired to leadership in the field of mass evangelism. It was the clear call of God through an inexplicable series of events that thrust me into a new dimension of activity in the field of evangelism.

Suddenly I found my sermons and statements being analyzed and criticized by hundreds of clergy, laymen and theologians throughout the world. Religious periodicals joined in applause or criticism of my message, methods and motives. To say the least, I was baffled, perplexed and even frightened. Over and over again I went to my knees and asked the Spirit of Wisdom for guidance and direction. Above all, I wanted my ministry to contribute to the advancement of the kingdom of God and the building of his church. There were times when I was tempted to flee from

problems and pressures and my inability to cope with them, but somehow, even in moments of confusion and indecision, it seemed that I could trace the steady hand of the sovereign God leading on.

Telephone calls, telegrams and letters began to pour in from all over the world, inviting me and my associates to come for crusades or speaking engagements. I was woefully unprepared for this new responsibility. I found myself addressing conventions and groups which demanded much more than I could give. Yet through it all there was a consciousness of the ever present Holy Spirit who supplied me with strength, courage and wisdom. How I wish I could take back some of the statements made in those early days because of immaturity or a lack of knowledge and experience. Many of those early statements were lifted out of context by some critics and used to ridicule the message as a whole. Then there were some misquotations that I still have to face and live down. For example, one evening in Pasadena I quoted the then secretary of the air force to the effect that America had two years in which to prepare. The next day a wire service sent across the country a report saying that I had predicted the end of the world in two years. It took me a long time to learn that a public speaker must be careful about the text as well as the context, else he is sure to be misunderstood.

This past decade has been hectic and busy, but glorious. It has taken me several times around the world. There have been triumphs and defeats, elations and deflations—but never once have I doubted the validity of the gift or the call to evangelism.

I

The lessons of this decade have been staggering. Many of my original concepts and convictions have become more certain; others have been amplified, enlarged and changed.

First, I recognize more clearly today than I did ten years ago the narrow limits assigned to the evangelist. I take as my definition of evangelism the classic one formed by the Archbishop of Canterbury's Committee of 1918: "To evangelize is so to present Christ Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit that men shall come to put their trust in God through Him, to accept Him as their Savior and serve Him as their King in the fellowship of His Church."

One of the best definitions of evangelism is that formulated by representatives of 30 Protestant communions at the 1946 meeting in Columbus, Ohio, of the executive committee of the old Federal Council of Churches. It reads: "Evangelism is the presentation of the good news of God in Jesus Christ so that men are brought through the power of the Holy Spirit to put their trust in God, accept Jesus Christ as their Savior from the guilt and power of sin, to follow and serve Him as their Lord in the fellowship of the church and in the vocations of the common life."

The evangel is the good news that God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself. The word *evangelism* comes from the word *evangel*, which means "good news" or "gospel." The evangelist is the *keryx*, or the proclaimer of this message. The Scriptures indicate that when Christ gave gifts to his church, one of the gifts was that of the evangelist (Eph. 4:11). Philip was called an evangelist, and Paul told Timothy to do the work of an evangelist. Yet some in the church refuse—to the detriment of the church—to recognize this particular gift that has been given to some men.

The message of the evangelist is "narrow." It does not spread-eagle out into the broad ramifications of a total theology or sociology. Contrary to the opinion of some, the evangelist is not primarily a social reformer, a temperance lecturer or a moralizer. He is simply a *keryx*, a proclaimer of the good news, which in capsule form is "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures; . . . was buried, and . . . rose again the third day, according to the Scriptures" (I Cor. 15:3f). This terse proclamation stretches over the broad frame of man's basic need. It declares that man is a sinner, that Christ is the only Savior, that Christ lives evermore and that the Scriptures are trustworthy.

The gospel is good news about something that God did in history and something he became in history in Jesus Christ. The evangelist must have a high Christology. The 1928 Jerusalem conference of the International Missionary Council stated: "Our message is Jesus Christ." And as D. T. Niles of Ceylon has written: "No understanding of Christian evangelism is possible without an appreciation of [the] nature of the Christian proclamation. It is not an affirmation of ideals which men must test and practice. It is not an explanation of life and its problems about which men must argue and with which in some form they must agree. It is rather the announcement of an event with which men must reckon. God hath made him both Lord and Christ. There is a finality about that pronouncement. It is independent of human opinion and human choice." And Jesse Bader: "Whatever else the content of the evangel

may be, at least it contains these three facts about the nature, life and mission of our Lord Jesus Christ—His incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection."

During the past ten years I have seen evangelism once again become a significant part of church life in America. Almost every denomination has a committee on evangelism. Most seminaries have a chair of evangelism. The watchword of the church is now *evangelize*. Even in our crusades we are receiving far more church participation than we did even two years ago—an indication of a growing realization that the church needs the message of the evangelist.

II

A second lesson of the past decade: I have come to face realistically the results of mass evangelism. I am convinced that mass evangelism is not the most ideal method of evangelism. There are many methods that the church can effectively use, and mass evangelism is only one of them. Yet it is an important one.

My associates and I have spent a great deal of time and effort in studying the results of our crusades. Personally I am sick of statistics. How can one translate a reconciled home, a transformed drunkard or a new selfless attitude into a cold statistic? The only reason we keep statistics at all is for the sake of accuracy. If no statistics were kept, the press would exaggerate out of all proportion the number of those who respond to the appeal. For several years we spoke of the responses of the people who came forward in our crusades as "decisions," but we have even stopped doing that, for only God knows how many have made a definite commitment to Christ. Now we simply call them "inquirers"—people whose interest is sufficiently strong to cause them to make further inquiry about the Christian life. But of course each of these persons is dealt with as an earnest seeker of salvation, as indeed most of them turn out to be. Every day we receive in the mail scores of letters from individuals whose lives have been permanently changed as a result of one of our crusades.

The stories that come to our attention daily are so thrilling and challenging that they themselves become an impetus to further evangelistic effort.

We are often criticized because the majority of those who respond to the appeal are already members of a church. This is true. But many have not stopped to realize that nearly half of the church members of America rarely attend church. These fringe people need a definite conversion experience or at least a recommitment to Christ.

George Sweazey has said: "The evangelizing of church membership is our first duty."
And Elton Trueblood:

If our only mission field is that of the 4 per cent who claim no affiliation, our opportunities for religious advance are severely limited. . . . Our main mission field today, so far as America is concerned, is within the church membership itself. . . . [Our] task *is* to try to reach the present membership of churches with a message of such vitality that all experience conversion within the church, rather than a conversion to the church. . . . In the Billy Graham Crusade in New York there were certain skeptics who sometimes complained that the figures were not dependable because, they said, many of the persons who made decisions for Christ were already church members. Therefore, they said, the statistical reports were not accurate. What amazing misunderstanding this shows on the part of the critic!

If I were not convinced that large numbers of the inquirers actually are transformed by Christ in our crusades, I would retire to my mountain home and spend the rest of my days writing devotional literature for armchair Christians. The positive proof that many people are being won to Christ by the medium of mass evangelism who might not be won in any other way stirs me to new efforts. The glamor of travel is gone. The thrill of addressing large audiences has never allured me. I have battled at times with severe physical limitations. I have a deep longing to spend the rest of my days in a quieter life. Yet until God gives the signal I cannot change this evangelistic compulsion that drives me on. The early Christians took the evangelistic imperative seriously. They put everything they had into it—time, possessions, life itself.

There are other results of the crusades that cannot be minimized. I am convinced that a crusade brings a new unity, a new vision and a new sense of dedication to the churches of the community. I am convinced that the conscience of a community can be deeply stirred when the churches in our great metropolitan areas coordinate their efforts in mass evangelistic campaigns. At the same time I must realistically face the fact that the crusades are no "cure-all" for the church or the community. Though lives are changed and some churches are revived, only a dent is usually made in a community. Someone had the audacity to argue that because the crime rate in New York City was not radically lowered as a result of our crusade there, the crusade was a failure. Only if the persons responsible for New York's crime had made an open

commitment to Christ could such an argument have validity and make sense. Evangelism is not "magic" nor does it affect people who isolate themselves from it. Yet in many cities crime has abated at least temporarily following our crusades; a newspaper in Sydney, Australia, reported that in some sections of the city the incidence of crime had been lowered by as much as 50 percent.

In the third place, my faith in earlier theological concepts has deepened. For example, the years have brought a deepening conviction that the Word of God is quick and powerful and a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart.

The church has been effective only when it has spoken with authority. Truth begets its own authenticity; if we allow the truth to become adulterated and weakened by rationalisms it loses its power. At one time I grappled with the problem of the authority of the Scriptures. But the problem resolved itself when I finally said, "Lord, I take the Scriptures as thy revealed Word—by faith!" That ended my doubts. From that day to this the Scriptures have been like a rapier in my hand and I am sure than I would be shorn of any effectiveness I may have if this authority were taken from me. Someone will cry "Bibliolatry," but a soldier need not worship his sword to wield it effectively. I have learned with Jeremiah: "Is not my word like as a fire? saith the Lord; and like a hammer that breaketh the rock in pieces?" (Jer. 23:29). I am convinced that the reason some ministers are cracking up is that they have no authority. I am thankful that there is a return to biblical preaching in America. The Scriptures are beginning to return to their rightful place as the authority in the church.

My faith in the centrality of the cross has also deepened. Christ said: "I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself" (John 12:32). The cross reveals the sins of men and it also reveals the unwearying love of God. There is power in the pronouncement that Christ died for our sins "according to the Scriptures." More and more I try to put the cross at the center of my message, and I find that when I fail to do this something is lacking in my presentation. The great apostle Paul declared, "I decided to know nothing among you save Jesus Christ and him crucified" (I Cor. 2:2).

The years have also deepened my conviction that the resurrection of Christ needs to be proclaimed with greater emphasis. Most of us proclaim it only at Easter time, but the New Testament breathes the spirit of the resurrection throughout. It was the fact of an empty tomb that drove the early disciples to turn the world upside down.

Somehow we must recapture the thrilling realization that Jesus lives and that "he that believeth in him, though he were dead, yet shall he live" (John 11:25).

My faith, moreover, has been deepened eschatologically. My thoughts about the second advent of Christ as the supreme hope of the church are as firm and as strong today as ever. However, I am no longer dogmatic on controversial aspects of this doctrine. In my estimation much harm has been done by hair-splitting, date-setting and overspecification. But we have no right to take lightly a doctrine that is so clearly and forth- rightly spelled out in the New Testament. It is a tragedy that communism often promises its adherents a brighter future than does the church of the living God. In talking to two of the world's leading theologians recently, I asked them what they thought the emphasis of preaching in the next ten years would be; both surprised me by saying, "Eschatology."

III

A fourth change is to be seen in the fact that during the past ten years my concept of the church has taken on greater dimension. Ten years ago my concept of the church tended to be narrow and provincial, but after a decade of intimate contact with Christians the world over I am now aware that the family of God contains people of various ethnological, cultural, class and denominational differences. I have learned that there can even be minor disagreements of theology, methods and motives but that within the true church there is a mysterious unity that overrides all divisive factors.

In groups which in my ignorant piousness I formerly "frowned upon" I have found men so dedicated to Christ and so in love with the truth that I have felt unworthy to be in their presence. I have learned that although Christians do not always agree, they can disagree agreeably, and that what is most needed in the church today is for us to show an unbelieving world that we love one another. To me the church has become a great, glorious and triumphant organism. It is the body of Christ, and the humblest member is an important part of that body. I have also come to believe that within every visible church there is a group of regenerated, dedicated disciples of Christ.

A fifth change: my belief in the social implications of the gospel has deepened and broadened. I am convinced that faith without works is dead. I have never felt that the accusations against me of having no social concern were valid. Often the

message of the evangelist is so personal that his statements on social matters are forgotten or left out when reports are made. It is my conviction that even though evangelism is necessarily confined within narrow limits the evangelist must not hedge on social issues. The cost of discipleship must be made plain from the platform. I have made the strongest possible statements on every social issue of our day. In addition, in our crusades we have tried to set an example. (Naturally, there are some statements that I made a few years ago on sociopolitical affairs that I would like to retract.)

Yet I am more convinced than ever before that we must change men before we can change society. The international problems are only reflections of individual problems. Sin is sin, be it personal or social, and the word *repent* is inseparably bound up with evangelism. Social sins, after all, are merely a large-scale projection of individual sins and need to be repented of by the offending segment of society. But the task of the evangelist is not merely to reform but to stimulate conversion, for conversion puts man in a position where God can do for him, and through him, what man is incapable of doing for or by himself.

Sixth, I have an increasing confidence in the ultimate triumph of the kingdom of God. I am convinced that history is not wandering aimlessly, but that there is a plan and purpose in what often seems to us hopeless confusion. God has intervened more than once in history, and there is every reason to believe that he will intervene again. Man may build his towers of Babel, as he always has, and the world may marvel at his genius and his ability to make progress even apart from God, but history shows that ultimately man comes down from his tower in confusion and chaos, disillusioned and frustrated. The Scriptures declare that there is only One whose kingdom shall never end. I believe that when our Lord prayed, "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven," he prayed a prayer which is going to be answered. This will come about not by man's efforts within history itself but by a direct, climactic intervention of the sovereign God.

Seventh, this past decade has been a period of ripening tares and ripening wheat. During this interval we have seen a strange paradox that often confused and bewildered me. We have seen a revival of religious interest throughout the United States but an acceleration of crime, divorce and immorality. Within the church there is a new depth of commitment, a new sense of destiny and a spirit of revival, yet in the world there is an intensification of the forces of evil. Crime is on the increase. Fear haunts the council halls of the nations. Wars, hot and cold, are being spawned

across the world. Family life is threatened by evil forces. And in many places there is a stark lack of social concern. The tares of evil flourish even in the same field with the growing grain of righteousness. But we forget that Christ said: "In the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, Gather ye first the tares and bind them in bundles and burn them; but gather the wheat into my barn" (Matt. 13:30). The wheat and the tares are destined to grow side by side; when wheat is sown, the Devil sows tares. But a day of separation, an ultimate triumph for truth and righteousness, is coming.

IV

What do the next ten years hold? Only God knows. They could well be the most critical years of human history. And I am glad to be alive at such a time as this. What a moment to be an ambassador for Christ; what an hour for the proclamation of his gospel! Christianity is the religion of crisis. For a world in ferment it is made to order, for it fits the heart and needs of man like a glove. This is the time to make Christ known, whether we be pastor, teacher, evangelist or layman. I intend by the grace of God to continue in my ordained calling until he says, "It is enough."

I recall a magnificent saying of Brindon to King Brude, uttered long ago. "What shall I find if I accept your gospel and become Christ's man?" asked the king. Brindon replied, "If you become Christ's man, you will stumble upon wonder after wonder, and every wonder will be true." If in this hour of crisis we will dare to be Christ's men, even in a time of blighting disillusionment, we will come upon wonder after wonder, and every wonder will be true.