

**Religious conversion in the sermons of Billy Graham
during the All Scotland Crusade of 1955**

Abstract

Billy Graham was one of the world's most famous Christian evangelists in the twentieth century. He visited Scotland in 1955 and led a six week Crusade at the Kelvin Hall in Glasgow. Thousands of people attended these rallies and listened to Graham preach. At the end of the campaign, it was calculated that 26,457 people had responded to the Gospel message proclaimed by Graham. This paper, based upon a critical examination of twenty four sermons delivered by Graham, will discuss how the American evangelist presented Evangelical conversion during this Crusade in Scotland. It will explore how becoming a Christian was proclaimed by Graham to his Scottish audience in 1955.

Key Words

All Scotland Crusade, conversion, evangelist, Gospel, Billy Graham, new birth

I

I am going to ask you to rise and come quietly and reverently and stand at the foot of His Cross symbolically and say. "I give my life to Christ. I surrender to Him. I don't understand it all, but I know I believe God. I don't understand all the issues involved but I know that I need Christ. I need God in my life." And I warn you, if you put this off you may never come. This is the moment and this is the hour, and I believe God sent you tonight. You may never have this moment again just like this. It may never come again.... I am going to ask you to rise and come quietly and reverently and stand in front of this platform and say tonight, "I will follow, I will trust Him, I want Him to touch my life. I want Him to forgive my sins, I commit myself to Him, I surrender my will to Him as Lord and Master and Saviour. And, from this moment on, I am going to serve Him and follow Him."¹

With this simple invitation, repeated night after night in the Kelvin Hall in 1955, Billy Graham encouraged people to make a life-changing decision and be 'born again'. The appeal was clear and uncomplicated. Men, women and young people were urged to stand up from their seats at the end of the sermon and walk to the front of a great platform. He always invited people to make their way to the front of the hall prayerfully, quietly and reverently. Strenuous efforts were made to prevent any emotional scenes during the Crusade. Meanwhile, Graham stood and waited, standing upright, often with 'his right first tucked under his chin (and) right elbow cupped in his left hand.'² At the platform, he led the gathered assembly in a 'conversion prayer'. People acknowledged they were sinners who needed the mercy of God, and they surrendered their life and will to Christ. Afterwards, they were led to an Inquiry Room for further spiritual counselling, where they signed Decision Cards.

Graham was, and remains, a world famous and successful Christian evangelist. It is estimated that during the course of his career, that spanned seven decades, he preached the Gospel to 215 million people in 185 countries around the globe. He addressed crowds of more than 100,000 people, and on two occasions spoke to more than 1 million in a single event.³ According to statistics produced by the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, 3.2 million people 'responded to the invitation' of Graham's altar call at the end of his services during the course of his ministry.⁴ Billy Graham has induced more people to be converted than anyone else across the world in the history of the church. No other evangelist has had such a decided effect upon the lives of men, women and children around the globe. Pragmatically, he is beyond any doubt the greatest evangelist of all time.

The All Scotland Crusade, which Graham led, ran for forty one days, from 21 March to 30 April, 1955. It is estimated that a total of 1,185,360 people attended a crusade event or meeting in person, not to mention the hundreds of thousands of others who listened to services on radio or watched them on television. The number of people who completed a Decision Card and whose details were recorded in an Inquiry Room after they responded to Graham's altar call, was 26,457, or 2.23% of the total number who attended his services. Significantly, four fifths of these inquirers said they were being 'born again' for the during

¹ Graham, Billy. "The Pool at Bethesda", (John 5:1-9), March 22, 1955, Glasgow, Scotland Crusade, page 13.

² Grant Wacker, *One Soul at a Time: The Story of Billy Graham* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2019), 95.

³ *Ibid*, xv,

⁴ *Ibid*, 288.

the crusade.⁵ The lives of thousands of people across Scotland were affected profoundly by the preaching of Graham. ‘Beyond all statistics’, Allan remarked, ‘is the unalterable fact that the Crusade under God, was the means of bringing men and women and young people into the Kingdom.’⁶ No-one, before or since, has exercised such an immediate spiritual influence upon the people of Scotland as Graham in 1955.

Despite the undisputed numerical success of Graham’s crusade in 1955 and his impact upon the religious life of Scotland, an important question remains. What was the nature of the conversion event these inquirers were invited to embrace when they responded to Graham’s altar call and walked from their seats to the front of the platform in the Kelvin Hall? What kind of ‘born again’ experience were they encouraged to receive? The aim of this paper is not to provide an appraisal of the All Scotland Crusade within the wider religious context of the period. The plan is not to examine the entire content of each evening’s event, while the objective is not to analyse the Kelvin Hall audience or the people who responded to the evangelist’s altar call. There will be limited engagement with the wider literature because the purpose here is significantly less ambitious and decidedly more focused. The goal is simply to provide a critical examination of how conversion was presented by Billy Graham in his sermons, held by Billy Graham Literary Foundation, during the 1955 All Scotland Crusade.

II

Conversion is considered by Evangelicals to be the mandatory way in which someone becomes a Christian.⁷ It is a religious rite of passage that signals a person has undergone a change in their spiritual status. The moment or process of conversion transforms an individual from unbelief to faith in Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord. It involves a radical reorientation and the complete transformation of a person’s character.⁸ Bebbington has provided a detailed discussion of conversion within the Evangelical and revivalist tradition which Graham represented. His main thesis is concerned with the manner in which the experience of the new birth within the tradition evolved between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. ‘The fundamental change’, he says, ‘was in the understanding of the balance between divine and human agency.’⁹ He continues, ‘The trend in the nineteenth century was for the human component to become exclusive so that divine participation in conversion tended to diminish.’¹⁰ Previously, and according to the influence of the Puritan and Calvinist traditions, Evangelicals understood that being born again was a monergistic episode when irresistible or efficacious grace for salvation was given by God to those whom he had chosen to save. Gradually, however, and with the birth of Methodism in the eighteenth century, and the rise of Arminianism, Evangelicals began to understand conversion as a synthesis between divine agency and human activity. Accordingly, the new birth was

⁵ Tom Allan, *Crusade in Scotland: Billy Graham* (London: Pickering and Inglis, 1955), 107-08.

⁶ Allan, *Crusade in Scotland*, 110.

⁷ David W. Bebbington, ‘Evangelical Conversion c1740-1850’, *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology*, Vol 18, No 2 (2000), 109.

⁸ George Redford, the Independent minister at Angel Street in Worcester, provides a working definition of conversion as it was understood in the mid C19. He said, it ‘is a change, or a turning about of our mind or heart, and signifies a reversing of our moral and religious state, a complete transformation of the character – from irreligion to piety, from sin to holiness. from unbelief to faith, from impenitence to contrition and confession, from the service of the world to the service of God, from uneasiness to peace, from fear to hope, from death to life.’ George Redford, *The Great Change: A Treatise on Conversion* (London, 1844?), 1, Bebbington, ‘Evangelical Conversion’, 107.

⁹ Bebbington, ‘Evangelical Conversion’, 119.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 120.

understood to be both a ‘divine transformation and a human achievement.’¹¹ The Enlightenment persuaded Evangelicals to increase their confidence in the free will of humanity to choose conversion, and this gave rise to a series of ‘means’ they employed in their efforts to encourage people to be born again.¹² ‘There was a trend over time’, Bebbington states, ‘towards deliberately creating the most favourable circumstances for turning to God.’¹³ As a result, the belief arose that people did not need to wait for God to act in order to be born again.¹⁴ Attitudes towards timing were changing. Thus, by the mid nineteenth century, there was a growing belief in humanity’s ability to choose conversion freely on their own and without any divine intervention or support.¹⁵ The activity of God was becoming less, while the role of the human will was becoming greater in the theology and practice of conversion among Evangelicals in America and England. However, in Scotland, where Calvinism remained more dominant within the religious culture, the belief in human ability was much less advanced.

In 1960, McLoughlin, an American revival historian, raised a concern about the manner in which Graham represented the new birth to his audiences. Graham, he said, had ‘reduced conversion to the verbal acceptance of the fundamentals on faith.’¹⁶ Moreover, he judged that Graham’s ‘telescoping of the conversion process considerably increases the impression that the individual sinner is the deciding force in effecting his own rebirth.’¹⁷ McLoughlin alleged that Graham presented conversion as an event that required no more than an act of a person’s will, expressed in a simple prayer. The evangelist was and remains the subject of decisionism accusations which suggest a person is converted by an exclusive human act.¹⁸ He has been charged with employing this flawed method and contrived technique, which caused people to believe that the new birth was the result of their personal decision.

Forsyth has been outspoken in his criticism of how the conversion experience was presented by Graham during the All Scotland Crusade in 1955. He has castigated the lack of intelligence he believes accompanied the altar call appeals that the evangelists made. Indeed, he described the ‘potential vacuity of (the 1955) Crusade conversion’ and accused Graham of inviting almost senseless responses to the Gospel’s appeal.¹⁹ Indeed, he continued, ‘The conclusion drawn after a passage of time was that the “conversion experience” induced might be so confused and paper-thin as to be not only meaningless but counter-productive.’²⁰ In the opinion of Forsyth, a Graham conversion was not only pointless and mindless, it was also damaging and detrimental to the interests of religion. Forsyth based this judgement upon comments made by DP Thomson during the crusade. Thomson was a Church of Scotland minister and evangelist. At the end of the All Scotland Crusade, he visited parishes across Scotland and interviewed

¹¹ Ibid, 119.

¹² These ‘means’ included the death of a friend, Sunday Schools that worked for conversions among children and young people, Methodist class meetings, and other Finney-ite ‘new measures’ such as the protracted meeting where the spiritual anxious received counselling and prayer with the aim of inducing conversion. Bebbington, ‘Evangelical Conversion’, 121.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid, 124.

¹⁶ William G. McLoughlin, *Billy Graham: Revivalist in a Secular Age* (The Ronald Press Company: New York, 1960), 14.

¹⁷ Ibid, 78.

¹⁸ Ken Matto, ‘Decisionism: Does God call you or do you call God?’, online at: ><https://www.scionofzion.com/decisionism.htm>>, accessed 29 April 2021.

¹⁹ A Forsyth, *Mission by the People: Re-Discovering the Dynamic Missiology of Tom Allan and his Scottish Contemporaries* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2017), 53.

²⁰ Ibid.

ministers about the campaign. He commented, ‘on the whole, the results were disquieting in the extreme. I ended the enquiry more convinced than ever of the dangers of ‘mass evangelism’.²¹ Thomson’s pastoral concern for Graham’s converts persuaded him that the new birth, that lay at the heart of the Gospel’s appeal, had been presented by the American evangelist in a shallow manner that risked causing emotional and spiritual injury. Thus, Forsyth is scathing in his criticism of Graham’s sermons during the campaign. He contends that the evangelist’s presentation of conversion inflicted damage upon the spiritual health and well-being of Scottish people.

Thomson had an occasion to meet Graham at Barnoak on 10 May 1955 at the end of the All Scotland Crusade. This meeting gave the Scottish evangelist an opportunity to share some of the concerns he held around Graham’s methods and message. Thomson was critical of what became a significant feature of Graham’s sermons in Glasgow, the insistence of the evangelist that his meetings afforded a once in a lifetime and only opportunity for people to be converted. On 3 May 1955, Thomson led a meeting at George Heriot’s School in Edinburgh. A number of the pupils had previously attended the Ibrox Football stadium meeting that Graham had conducted in Glasgow. In a ‘Question and Answer’ session after Thomson spoke, a young pupil asked him, ‘Was Dr Graham entitled to say to a boy of 17 that this was his last chance (to be converted)?’²² Afterwards, and at the subsequent meeting Thomson had with Graham on 10 May 1955, he recorded in his diary, ‘We covered a great deal of ground... (including) improved personal work and follow up, the danger of over emphasis on “This is your last chance” etc. Billy was deeply moved and profoundly impressed.’²³ There were significant concerns among many during the All Scotland Crusade about Graham’s emphasis that the campaign afforded the only and last chance people had to be converted. Thomson believed that evangelists should preach for a decision, but he held grave misgivings over Graham’s incessant, pressurized and repeated appeals.

Meanwhile, Grant Wacker, one of the most celebrated Graham scholars, has also considered the manner in which the evangelist presented conversion to his crusade audiences. Wacker states that the new birth sat at the centre of Graham’s gospel and evangelism.²⁴ In an earlier article, he wrote, ‘In Graham’s hands, the conversion experience, the centrepiece of the revival tradition, pivoted on classically American understandings of the importance of rational decisiveness.... All messages demanded a decision.’²⁵ He reminded his readers that Graham’s weekly radio programme, first broadcast in 1950 was called ‘The Hour of Decision’ while his monthly magazine was entitled ‘Decision.’²⁶ The evangelist insisted upon the need for people to make a personal decision for Christ in order they would be born again. Men and women were implored to make their choice. In *One Soul at a Time*, Wacker states, ‘In the early days he had called for something like a “ready-set-go” conversion experience.’²⁷ It was immediate and it was spontaneous. It is little wonder that the headlines of newspaper reports read ‘Split-Second Salvation is Promised All.’²⁸ A short walk to a platform and the signing of a decision

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid, 319.

²³ Ibid, 316.

²⁴ ‘In Graham’s preaching the new birth constituted the centerpiece of the gospel... the new birth stood at the center of his own work.’ Grant Wacker, *America’s Pastor: Billy Graham and the Shaping of a Nation* (Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014), 33.

²⁵ Grant Wacker, ‘Billy Graham’s America’, *Church History*, Vol 78, No 3 (2009), 501, 503.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Wacker, *One Soul at a Time*, 253.

²⁸ Andrew Finsteun, Anne Blue Wills, Grant Wacker, eds, *Billy Graham: American Pilgrim* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 278.

card was all that was required for someone to become a Christian at the evangelist's meetings. It is unsurprising, therefore, that Graham's presentation of an instantaneous new birth was met with criticism. Martin reports how 'Strict Calvinists objected to his use of the invitation, contending that salvation is by God, not something humans can simply choose to accept or reject.'²⁹ These scholars held that irresistible grace, and not a person's will, determined that one was born again. However, his most severe judgment came from Reinhold Niebuhr, Professor at Union Theological Seminary and perhaps one of most influential American theologians of the twentieth century. In a biting comment, he said that Graham's sermons 'promises a new life, not through painful religious experience but merely by signing a decision card... A miracle of regeneration is promised at a painless price by an obviously sincere evangelist. It is a bargain.'³⁰ A Graham conversion was, in Niebuhr's opinion, a discounted good deal. Grace, he contended, had become too cheap and the new birth had become too easy in the gospel of the evangelist. Therefore, there was some concern surrounding Graham's theology and practice of conversion before he arrived in Glasgow in March 1955.

III

Twenty-four sermons Graham preached in the Kelvin Hall during the All Scotland Crusade were analysed in an effort to critically examine how he presented conversion to his audience in 1955. In the first instance, it is notable how the evangelist repeatedly, and in almost every sermon, confessed that he was unable to understand and therefore explain the unfathomable mysteries that lay at the heart of the Gospel message and the conversion experience. He did not completely comprehend the transaction that took place between God and His Son, Jesus Christ, during the death of the latter on the Cross at Calvary.³¹ Neither could he figure out how the Holy Spirit was able to infuse the life of God into a believer.³² Indeed, and despite his resolute confidence in the Bible, he admitted that it contained several enigmas that he could not grasp.³³ The evangelist admitted there were aspects of the new birth that were beyond the limited comprehension of humanity. There were elements of the conversion experience that defied rationale thought. They were part of the mystery of the Christian life that had to be accepted by faith.³⁴

Nevertheless, Graham had learnt from psychologists there were two standard types of religious conversion. The first was brought about by a personal awareness of guilt over wrongdoing, while the second was caused by feeling generally disgruntled by life and wanting a better life.³⁵ Graham repeatedly asked his audience about their life desires. On 22 March he said,

*Do you want to be whole? Do you want to be forgiven tonight, do you want to know that you are going to heaven, do you want to know that your past has been forgiven, do you want your life transformed tonight, do you want the joy and the thrill and the happiness that come in living for Christ... do you really want that kind of life?*³⁶

²⁹ William Martin, *The Billy Graham Story: A Prophet with Honour* (London: Hutchison, 1992), 174.

³⁰ Wacker, *One Soul at a Time*, 110.

³¹ Graham, Billy. "The Pool at Bethesda", (John 5:1-9), March 22, 1955, Glasgow, Scotland Crusade, page 9.

³² Graham, Billy. "Nicodemus", (John 3:1-7), April 9, 1955, Glasgow, Scotland Crusade, page 7.

³³ Graham, Billy. "The Sermon on the Mount", (Matthew 5-7), April 1, 1955, Glasgow, Scotland Crusade, page 7.

³⁴ Graham, Billy. "Following Christ", (Matthew 16:24), April 11, 1955, Glasgow, Scotland Crusade, page 2.

³⁵ Billy Graham, *Peace with God* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1984), 134.

³⁶ Graham, Billy. "The Pool at Bethesda", (John 5:1-9), March 22, 1955, Glasgow, Scotland Crusade, page 11.

Previously, Edwards had identified how affections lay at the heart of true religion. Emotions, he contended, awakened and united people's understanding and will. Hence, the early revivalist believed that all preaching ought to appeal to the emotions, especially the feeling of desire.³⁷ Graham sought to arouse desire by presenting the Gospel in a positive manner as the means by which sins could be forgiven and a person's life could be transformed and made whole with happiness and joy. His oft-repeated questions, 'Do you want....?', 'Do you really want...?' gave Graham the opportunity to target the general dissatisfactions that people felt towards life and to present conversion as the means by which their living could be improved and transformed in beneficial ways.

Moreover, these questions were framed in such a way as to create the impression that being born again was an act of a person's will. Graham was anxious to stress that God would not compel anyone to become a Christian. He told his audience at the Kelvin Hall

He's (Jesus Christ) not going to come and make a Christian out of anybody, He's not going to come and force you to do anything... Because when God created you, He created you in the image of God and He gave you the greatest of all gifts, the freedom of choice. You have the freedom of choice, you can make your own choices in life and God won't make them for you if you don't want Him to.³⁸

Graham's understanding of the supremacy of human free will and people's ability to choose whether or not to accept God's offer of salvation indicates he held a distinctly, more Arminian understanding of prevenient grace. He did not subscribe to the Calvinist doctrine of irresistible or efficacious grace which contended that God could overcome the unwillingness of people to receive salvation and bring people to faith, whether they wanted this for themselves or not. He was quite adamant, 'God does not compel any man to follow Christ. God does not compel any man to follow Him and surrender to Him. And *you* have to make *your* own choice.... it's a decision that *you* and *you* alone have to make.'³⁹

Graham was unequivocal in stressing that being born again was first and foremost the free choice of a person's will. It was their decision to make.

Notwithstanding this clear emphasis he placed upon the activity of the human will that lay at the heart of the new birth, Graham informed his audience that their coming to the Kelvin Hall was not the result of their free choice. Instead, they were present at the Crusade because God had chosen they would be there. On the 25 March 1955, he told the crowds gathered in the Kelvin Hall,

You are not in this auditorium tonight by accident... you are not here by accident, you are here by divine appointment. God planned it and appointed this very hour that you were to meet Christ. Listen, it's for you tonight, and long before you were ever born, your past had been planned that you would come this way this night. And don't you miss this night. If God means for you to come to Christ tonight, don't you miss it... this is your divine appointment tonight. This is the

³⁷ Finsteun, Blue Wills, Wacker, eds, *Billy Graham*, 45.

³⁸ Graham, Billy. "Following Christ", (Matthew 16:24), April 11, 1955, Glasgow, Scotland Crusade, page 6.

³⁹ Graham, Billy. "Joshua", (Joshua 24:15-16), April 12, 1955, Glasgow, Scotland Crusade, page 10.

moment you were meant to meet God.’⁴⁰

Thus, and despite his earlier claims about the primacy of the human freedom to choose, he told his listeners that they had had no alternative but to come to the Kelvin Hall because God had ordained that moment in their lives from before they were born. Their attendance at the All Scotland Crusade was a divine appointment, according to the eternal and sovereign purposes of God.

Graham went on to consider the experience of conversion in three stages or moments. In his typical conversational manner, he declared, ‘You say, “Well, Billy, what do I have to do? (to become a Christian)”’ Then, he instructed his audience,

First, you have the acknowledge that you are a sinner, and you have to be willing to turn from your sin... And then, second, to believe, to surrender... surrender your will and your heart, and your mind, your friends, your home... And, third, the moment you do, the Bible says the Spirit of God comes and transforms you, and you are born again.⁴¹

Graham, from the start of the All Scotland Crusade, clearly included repentance, saving faith and the regenerative work of the Holy Spirit as the constituent elements in the process of conversion.

Repentance, in Graham’s account of the new birth, marked the beginning of the process of conversion. This act involved three movements. In the first instance, a person was invited to acknowledge their wrongdoing and admit their transgression against the law and will of God. This required humility. Yet, Graham said this was the simple part of repentance.

It’s easy to admit that you’re a sinner, but to repent is a very different thing... Repentance carried with it the idea that you turn from sin, that you forsake sin, that you drop sin from your life, that you turn away from it. That is repentance.⁴²

Consequently, people were instructed to renounce and turn away from their sinful attitudes and behaviour. Lastly, they were directed to turn to the cross of Christ where the act of repentance should take place. ‘If you want everlasting life’, he told his audience, ‘you’ll have to acknowledge your sins, repent of your sins, and then by faith stand at the foot of the Cross and receive Christ as Lord.’⁴³ This act, of turning towards Christ, Graham said, was necessary before anyone could receive the new, eternal life that God offered them.⁴⁴ He insisted, ‘You’ll never get to heaven without coming to the Cross of Christ, acknowledging that you’re a sinner and submitting your will to Christ.’⁴⁵ Throughout his sermons in Glasgow, Graham presented repentance, the first stage in the process of conversion, as the act of a person’s will. People acknowledged their sins. They turned away from their misdeeds. They approached the cross. It is significant there were no references made to the operation of the Holy Spirit in repentance in Graham’s preaching. In his Glasgow sermons, turning away

⁴⁰ Graham, Billy. “The Woman at the Well”, (John 4), March 25, 1955, Glasgow, Scotland Crusade, page 5,6.

⁴¹ Graham, Billy. “The Pool at Bethesda”, (John 5:1-9), March 22, 1955, Glasgow, Scotland Crusade, page 13.

⁴² Graham, Billy. “Joshua”, (Joshua 24:15-16), April 12, 1955, Glasgow, Scotland Crusade, page 10.

⁴³ Graham, Billy. “The Woman at the Well”, (John 4), March 25, 1955, Glasgow, Scotland Crusade, page 11.

⁴⁴ Graham, Billy. “Joshua”, (Joshua 24:15-16), April 12, 1955, Glasgow, Scotland Crusade, page 10.

⁴⁵ Graham, Billy. “The Ten Commandments”, (Exodus 20), March 28, 1955, Glasgow, Scotland Crusade, page 2.

from sin was a human activity.

Faith, according to Graham's presentation of the Gospel, was the second part of the new birth. Again, he warned his audiences, 'You'll never get to heaven without faith in Christ.'⁴⁶ The way to eternal life would be denied to those who did not believe. Still, Graham was anxious to distinguish belief and trust. 'There is a difference', he said, 'between "believe" and "trust". You can believe with your head, but you must trust.'⁴⁷ Trust, in Graham's mind, involved committing and surrendering oneself to Jesus Christ. On many occasions throughout the course of the All Scotland Crusade, he used the illustration of the platform from which he preached. He said that he could believe in his mind that it was a strong platform but 'I am not trusting that platform until I take a step and stand on it.'⁴⁸ Taking that step of faith, Graham said, meant entrusting one's life and committing one's will to Jesus Christ.⁴⁹ At that precise moment, Graham said, a connection was made with God which resulted in the Holy Spirit transforming the person into a new being.⁵⁰ Again, the step of faith was presented as an act of a person's will. The Holy Spirit was not involved in this stage of the new birth. It is noticeable, furthermore, that Graham expected his audience to trust in Jesus Christ immediately. There was, in Graham's sermons, no delay between repentance and believing. Faith came quickly.

Thirdly, the mysterious and miraculous act of regeneration, undertaken by the Holy Spirit, completed the process of conversion. It was God's Spirit that enabled people to become truly born again.⁵¹ Significantly, the evangelist was supremely confident that the Spirit was present and active in the Kelvin Hall wooing people towards Christ. He said, 'To help you make your decision for God, the Holy Spirit is in this building right now... the Holy Spirit is speaking, wooing, taking these words that I am saying and driving them into your soul.'⁵² Graham had not a single doubt that the Holy Spirit was operating among the audience and that men and women were being drawn to Jesus through the words of his sermon. The particular moment of the astonishing new birth took place, after repentance and faith, when the Spirit of God entered a person's life and transformed their moral nature and recreated them into a new person.⁵³ This was the occasion of the infusion, when God placed his life into the very being of the converted, and they were born again.⁵⁴ At this stage in the process of conversion, Graham left his audience in no doubt that the Holy Spirit completed the new birth. The work of implanting God's life into the life of the new believer was a task that only the Holy Spirit could complete. Noteworthy, nonetheless, was the absolute and complete certainty Graham possessed that the Holy Spirit was operating during his sermons in the Kelvin Hall. He was utterly assured that the Spirit infused the divine life into those who responded to his altar call.

Graham also distinguished the activity of the mind, the emotions and the will within the

⁴⁶ Ibid. 3.

⁴⁷ Graham, Billy. "The Rich Young Ruler", (Luke 10:17-25), April 19, 1955, Glasgow, Scotland Crusade, page 14.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Graham, Billy. "The Cost", (Luke 9:57-62), April 22, 1955, Glasgow, Scotland Crusade, page 3.

Graham, Billy. "The Ten Commandments", (Exodus 20), March 28, 1955, Glasgow, Scotland Crusade, page 9.

⁵⁰ Graham, Billy. "Joshua", (Joshua 24:15-16), April 12, 1955, Glasgow, Scotland Crusade, page 10.

⁵¹ Graham, Billy. "Untitled", (John 11), March 24, 1955, Glasgow, Scotland Crusade, page 9.

⁵² Graham, Billy. "Joshua", (Joshua 24:15-16), April 12, 1955, Glasgow, Scotland Crusade, page 10.

⁵³ Graham, Billy. "The Ten Commandments", (Exodus 20), March 28, 1955, Glasgow, Scotland Crusade, page 13; Graham, Billy. "Pharaoh's Hardened Heart", (Exodus 7:14), April 14, 1955, Glasgow, Scotland Crusade, page 12.

⁵⁴ Graham, Billy. "Untitled", (John 11), March 24, 1955, Glasgow, Scotland Crusade, page 10.

Graham, Billy. "The Woman at the Well", (John 4), March 25, 1955, Glasgow, Scotland Crusade, page 3.

movement towards the new birth. ‘What does it mean to choose God?’, he asked. ‘Well’, he said, ‘you have an intellect, you have an emotional life, but you have something else.’⁵⁵ The intellect acknowledged a person’s sinfulness, while the emotions informed them of their sickness. There needed to be, according to Graham, something more than an academic and demonstrative response to the Gospel in order for someone to be born again. Indeed, he laid a very strong emphasis on this ‘something else’ which he defined as a person’s will. He stated clearly,

There must be the bending of he will to God. And the hardest thing is to surrender is our will. Our intellects are easy; we can believe on God and we can believe on Christ. Our emotions can be stirred and that is easy. But when it comes to bending our will to God, that’s a totally different thing. It’s the hardest thing to surrender, our will. And I want to tell you, you’re not thoroughly converted to Christ and you’re not on the way to heaven until your will has been bent to His.⁵⁶

Notwithstanding what people said they believed in their minds or what they felt in their hearts, Graham proclaimed that it was essential that they declared, according to their will, that they would follow and serve God.⁵⁷ Only then, and at that moment, according to the evangelist, had conversion truly taken place.⁵⁸

Indeed, Graham was anxious to stress during the All Scotland Crusade that people should not expect their conversion experience to be accompanied by emotions. Graham’s team organized and orchestrated the campaign in order to prevent any impassioned behaviour. Colin Craig, from the British Weekly, reported, ‘I felt not the merest ripple of mass-emotion... It appeared as if the American Team was deliberately seeking to avoid the least appearance of emotionalism.’⁵⁹ He commented upon the very ordinary and conservative order of service that was designed in order to inhibit any excited, religious feeling. ‘It’s not an emotional experience’, the evangelist told his audience quite bluntly. Rather, he continued, ‘It’s a simple resolve that you are renouncing your past sins and life. You are giving your life to Christ to walk with Him from this moment on.’⁶⁰ Graham reduced conversion to a simple act of the will that was devoid of feeling. He went on, ‘forget your feelings. You don’t come to Christ just by emotion and by feeling. You come to Him by bending your will to Him and saying, “I will follow Him, I will serve Him, I will let Him into my life.”’⁶¹ Accordingly, Graham presented the new birth as a rather cerebral, detached decision of a person’s will. It is possible Graham had been warned about the emotion averse nature of the Scottish character. Nevertheless, it is clear that he removed all demonstrative feeling from the experience. Graham did not encourage his audience to expect that their hearts would be strangely warmed when they were born again.

Perhaps the most significant feature of the manner in which Graham presented conversion in Glasgow in 1955 was his insistence that being born again was the immediate and

⁵⁵ Graham, Billy. “The Ten Commandments”, (Exodus 20), March 28, 1955, Glasgow, Scotland Crusade, page 8.

⁵⁶ Graham, Billy. “The Cost”, (Luke 9:57-62), April 22, 1955, Glasgow, Scotland Crusade, page 6.

⁵⁷ Graham, Billy. “The Sermon on the Mount”, (Matthew 5-7), April 1, 1955, Glasgow, Scotland Crusade, page 4.

⁵⁸ Graham, Billy. “The Ten Commandments”, (Exodus 20), March 28, 1955, Glasgow, Scotland Crusade, page 9.

⁵⁹ Allan, *Crusade in Scotland*, 10.

⁶⁰ Graham, Billy. “The Pool at Bethesda”, (John 5:1-9), March 22, 1955, Glasgow, Scotland Crusade, page 13.

⁶¹ Graham, Billy. “Untitled”, (John 11), March 24, 1955, Glasgow, Scotland Crusade, page 14.

instantaneous result of the act of a person's will. He placed a very particular emphasis on the imminence of the new birth. In his sermon on the healing of the man by the pool at Bethsaida, Graham said, 'he had been made whole, not gradually, not progressively, but immediately, he was made whole.... And immediately the man had faith.... he didn't wait. He didn't say "Well, Jesus, I think I'll wait awhile, I'd like to think that over."' ⁶² In a further sermon on the woman caught in the act of adultery, Graham said, 'In that moment, that woman had met the Saviour, in that moment He had come into her life and forgiven her of every sin she had ever committed. She was receiving Him right then.' ⁶³ Upon this basis, he urged his audience to be converted immediately. 'You can do it right now. Right this minute you can settle it,' he told them. ⁶⁴ 'The one moment of decision,' he said, 'the one act of receiving Him is done in a moment, that quick.' ⁶⁵ It is a striking feature of the evangelist's sermons that he placed such a decided stress upon the sudden and quick nature of the new birth. There was, in Graham's Gospel, no sense of a long or a protracted experience of spiritual anxiety. Conversion was not precipitated, as it had been among Evangelicals in previous centuries, by a sustained period of soul concern. On the contrary, being 'born again' could be quick and spontaneous.

However, of greater concern was the emotional pressure Graham used to induce people to respond to his altar call and be born again. He consistently told his audiences that their coming to the Kelvin Hall was their divine appointment and this was the moment God had chosen for them to become a Christian. Repeatedly, he warned them that if they refused to choose to be converted, then such an opportunity to receive eternal life might never be given to them again. ⁶⁶ The Holy Spirit, Graham insisted, was among them, wooing them with His still small voice, but they might never have another chance in the rest of their lives to respond to Him. ⁶⁷ This moment may never come again, and so they were urged to accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour immediately, that night, while there was still time. ⁶⁸ He appealed to the people relentlessly

You stand here tonight at the crossroads of life. Maybe you've stood here before in your life and now God is giving you one more chance – it could be the last chance that you'll ever have. You stand here at the crossroad and you have to make a decision... You have to make that choice tonight... Tonight you have your moment, you have your chance, you have your choice.' ⁶⁹

The repetitive use of the pronouns 'you' and 'your', ten times in this brief sermon quotation, indicate the decided emphasis that Graham placed upon each person's decision and will. It was their moment. It was their opportunity. It was their choice. It

⁶² Graham, Billy. "The Pool at Bethsaida", (John 5:1-9), March 22, 1955, Glasgow, Scotland Crusade, page 12.

⁶³ Graham, Billy. "The Moral Problem", (John 7:37-8:11), March 23, 1955, Glasgow, Scotland Crusade, page 11.

⁶⁴ Graham, Billy. "Untitled", (John 11), March 24, 1955, Glasgow, Scotland Crusade, page 14.

⁶⁵ Graham, Billy. "The Rich Young Ruler", (Luke 10:17-25), April 21, 1955, Glasgow, Scotland Crusade, page 9.

⁶⁶ Graham, Billy. "The Pool at Bethsaida", (John 5:1-9), March 22, 1955, Glasgow, Scotland Crusade, page 13; Graham, Billy. "Pharoah's Hardened Heart", (Exodus 7:14), April 14, 1955, Glasgow, Scotland Crusade, page 11.

⁶⁷ Graham, Billy. "Untitled", (John 11), March 24, 1955, Glasgow, Scotland Crusade, page 15; Graham, Billy. "The Ten Commandments", (Exodus 20), March 28, 1955, Glasgow, Scotland Crusade, page 14; Graham, Billy. "Blind Bartimaeus", (Mark 10:46-52), April 15, 1955, Glasgow, Scotland Crusade, page 11.

⁶⁸ Graham, Billy. "Untitled", (John 11), March 24, 1955, Glasgow, Scotland Crusade, page 15.

⁶⁹ Graham, Billy. "The Ten Commandments", (Exodus 20), March 28, 1955, Glasgow, Scotland Crusade, page 7.

might never come again.

In addition, Graham cautioned the people against hardening their hearts against God to such an extent against the Holy Spirit, that He was no longer able to speak to them. 'When that time comes, it is very rarely that He can be heard once again.'⁷⁰ There was a great risk in refusing the mercy of God⁷¹, 'and tonight', Graham said, 'it is possible to so harden your heart against the mercy of God that mercy at some future point will turn to judgment.'⁷² Quoting Proverbs 1 v28, 'There will come a time when they will call upon me, but I will not answer; there will come a time when they will seek me but not find me', Graham admonished his audience

God says a man that has put it off and put it off, opportunity after opportunity, is going to call some day, but it will be too late. I warn you to come to Christ now, give your life to Him now while you can. One of these days it may be too late.'⁷³

Indeed, Graham went further to suggest that people could not come to Jesus at any moment in their lives. He said,

When God speaks to you is the *only time* that you can come to Christ. You can't just run up to Jesus any old time and say, "Well, here I am, Lord." You've got to come when the Spirit of God draws you, when the Spirit of God is speaking, and He's doing that tonight.⁷⁴

There were, in Graham's theology of the new birth, a limited number of divine occasions when someone could be converted. There was no relentless pursuit of grace, seeking the salvation of the sinner in the evangelist's gospel. On the contrary, Graham believed his sermons provided a rare salvific moment and this unique opportunity to be born again should not be missed. There was almost a sense of utter desperation in Graham's appeal when he said, 'This is the hour. This is the moment, and it may never come again like this.'⁷⁵ There was an undeniable threat implicit in these sermons. Graham placed a great emphasis upon the responsibility of the person's decision, whether or not they chose to be born again. Receiving the new birth depended entirely upon the decision that Graham implored his audience to make immediately, that night. The opportunity to become a Christian might never appear again.

Billy Graham had been a successful brush salesman before he became an evangelist. He understood the arts of persuasion and was skilled in inducing people to accept the message he sought to deliver. Listening carefully to his All Scotland Crusade sermons creates the impression he behaved, at times, like an anxious, incessant salesman who was offering a forced, 'one day only' sale and was determined to secure a deal. The latent threats that appeared in his addresses betray a dangerous determination. Despite being undoubtedly earnest and sincere, Graham behaved like a 'high pressure' evangelist who unashamedly used

⁷⁰ Graham, Billy. "The Coming Storm", (Luke 8:22-29), April 2, 1955, Glasgow, Scotland Crusade, page 10.

⁷¹ Graham, Billy. "The Rich Young Ruler", (Luke 10:17-25), April 21, 1955, Glasgow, Scotland Crusade, page 9.

⁷² Ibid. 10.

⁷³ Graham, Billy. "Untitled", (Daniel 5:27), April 21, 1955, Glasgow, Scotland Crusade, page 5.

⁷⁴ Graham, Billy. "The Ten Commandments", (Exodus 20), March 28, 1955, Glasgow, Scotland Crusade, page 14.

⁷⁵ Graham, Billy. "Gallio, Felix, Agrippa", (Acts 18:17; 24:25; 26:27-28), April 23, 1955, Glasgow, Scotland Crusade, page 10.

concern and fear to persuade people to respond immediately to his appeal to be ‘born again.’ Through his repeated appeals to come forward and be born again, it is likely that Graham created unnecessary concern and doubt in the hearts and minds of people who had already encountered Christ and received salvation at previous times and places and in other ways. Graham’s Gospel proclaimed one, limited way to find the Saviour, by standing up, walking to a platform, being led in prayer, signing a decision card, and speaking to a counsellor. There were, in Graham’s theology and practice of conversion, as revealed in his All Scotland Crusade sermons, no other paths to redemption. For church people in Scotland, who maintained a more Calvinist understanding of the new birth, Graham’s gospel was significantly imbalanced and laid much too strong an emphasis upon the act of a person’s will. Increasingly, they were concerned that the work of the Holy Spirit in conversion was underplayed and underrepresented.

IV

The aim of this article was to critically examine the sermons of Billy Graham during the All Scotland Crusade in order to consider the manner in which he presented conversion to the people of Scotland in 1955. Bebbington has established there was a clear change in how the new birth was understood and presented within the evangelical and revivalist tradition of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The act of the human will in choosing conversion had become more important. McLoughlin was the first scholar, in 1960, to denounce Graham’s portrayal of the new birth. Forsyth and Thomson have criticized Graham’s presentation of the Gospel and suggested that it caused emotional and spiritual damage to the people of Scotland. Niebuhr was equally scathing in his judgment, while Wacker observed the importance Graham attached to the human decision he implored his audiences to make in order to become a Christian.

In this study of twenty four sermons the evangelist delivered at the Kelvin Hall in Glasgow, it was revealed that notwithstanding the mysterious nature of the new birth, Graham presented the Gospel as a positive message that promised a new and a transformed life. Although they had had no choice about attending the campaign, because they had been divinely appointed to be present, the evangelist assured his audience that they would not be compelled to be ‘born again’. Graham presented the three steps of conversion clearly. People were required to repent, to believe and to allow the Holy Spirit to impart God’s life within them. Notwithstanding the role of the mind and emotions, it was the act of a person’s will that was most decisive in the new birth. Repentance and faith were presented as human activities. They were the responses that people made as they surrendered their wills to Christ. However, it was the work of the Holy Spirit that infused the new life into the soul of humanity. Graham was supremely confident that the Spirit was active during his sermons, undertaking this work. The new birth, according to the evangelist, was a detached and emotion-free experience that did not involve feelings. Perhaps of greatest significance was Graham’s insistence that conversion was the immediate result of the spontaneous act of a person’s will. It could be very sudden and very quick. At the last, Graham presented conversion as an opportunity to receive a new life that might never be available again. In Graham’s gospel, there were a limited number of moments when someone could become a Christian, and thus he threatened and warned his audiences not to miss the occasion he offered them to be ‘born again.’

Notwithstanding Graham’s charismatic appeal, his hugely popular success and the fact that a very significant number of people were converted during the All Scotland Crusade, this critical examination of his sermons reveals that he presented conversion in a highly pressured

manner, as the people's verdict. The new birth was their choice. It was their decision. It was the result of an operation of their will. The activity of God, within the divine economy of grace, in leading people to repentance and providing saving faith, was significantly underplayed. Being 'born again' was presented in Scotland in 1955 by the American evangelist as the simple act of walking towards and standing in front of a platform, participating in a conversion prayer, signing a decision card and receiving spiritual guidance from a Christian counsellor. As a result, conversion among many Evangelicals in the second half of the twentieth century was understood increasingly as an act of the human will, rather than as a work of God.

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