

Leadership Assessment of  
Dr. Billy Graham

Longtime editor of Billy Graham's *Decision* magazine and Graham's personal friend Sherwood Wirt once observed, "All attempts to explain Billy Graham fail unless they begin at the cross."<sup>1</sup> Further, Harold Myra suggests that it is the cross that created a laser focus for Graham influencing his ministry and leadership. "Billy knew the Bible stated Jesus had suffered the horrors of the cross 'for the joy that was set before him.' He too was fueled by that proffered joy."<sup>2</sup>

When the name Billy Graham is mentioned, it is not generally thought of in terms of organizational leader but rather as a name that reflects a gifted and much admired worldwide preacher of the gospel. It is probably safe to say that Graham himself prefers it that way as well. Yet a careful study of his life and decades at the helm of arguably the largest most influential Christian ministry organization in modern history, and perhaps all of the era of Christian ministry, would reveal one of the most focused and influential leaders in modern history. For decades Graham has appeared on the lists of the world's most admired men. For example, the Gallup organization reports that over the last seven years, Graham has appeared as the third most admired man in the world twice, the second most admired man in the world four times and the fourth most admired man in the world once. Only ranking behind current and former presidents, while ranking ahead of notable leaders like, Donald Trump, Bill Gates, Warren Buffett and Pope Benedict XVI, among others.<sup>3</sup>

But how is it that this most admired man, who has impacted millions, who's counsel has been sought by numerous world leaders and who has repeatedly been asked to provide cultural clarity during times of national crisis, come to this place of leadership and influence? As Myra

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<sup>1</sup> Harold Myra, *The Leadership Secrets of Billy Graham* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2005), 31.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>3</sup> *Most Admired Man and Woman*. <http://www.gallup.com/poll/1678/most-admired-man-woman.aspx> (accessed August 16, 2012).

states, “All this from a skinny farm kid from Charlotte, North Carolina? What ignited all this? Who could have come anywhere close to predicting it?”<sup>4</sup> To assess the development of this remarkable worldwide leader, an examination of developmental influences upon his early life and early ministry may provide some helpful insight.

When Graham was young he was quiet, reserved and somewhat introverted. In fact one elementary school teacher described him this way, “In the classroom, in front of the other students, he would hardly open his mouth. He was terribly shy and timid.” While another said, “I just couldn’t get him to say a word in class. I remember once, he just sat there looking at me after I asked him a question, and I finally burst out in exasperation, ‘Billy Frank, don’t just sit there—say something. Please, just say something.’ Not a sound. He just kept starring at me.”<sup>5</sup> So what happened to this shy child who would become a world spokesman for God?

Perhaps Erik Erikson’s psychosocial personality developmental theory provides some light when it suggests that a person develops an understanding of themselves as unique individuals as they deal with the various challenges that life brings.<sup>6</sup> One early incident in Graham’s life may best capture how God used the psychosocial developmental process to initiate new directions in Billy Graham’s life. Graham had fallen for a young college classmate named Emily Cavanaugh. After only one semester Graham asked her to marry him. He was stunned however when she told him that she did not believe they were right for one another and that she did not see any purpose in Graham’s life. The devastating news caused Graham to write in a note to a friend, “All the stars have fallen out of my sky.” For months that followed Graham grieved not only the breakup, but also the fact that he did not feel he had a sense of direction in his life.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Erik Erikson, “Personality Development And Christian Formation,” in *Christian Formation: Integrating Theology and Human Development*, Eds. James R. Estep and Jonathan H. Kim, (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2010), 101.

The subsequent results lead him to an autumn evening on a Florida golf course where he kneeled in prayer with tears in his eyes and declared, “All right, Lord! If you want me, you’ve got me, If I’m never to get Emily, I’m gonna follow you. No girl or anything else will come first in my life again. You can have all of me from now on. I’m gonna follow you at all cost.”<sup>7</sup>

This event would radically alter Graham’s life, his spiritual formation and his calling. Further, the incident reveals a clear overlap between Erik Erikson’s stages of crisis<sup>8</sup> and their spiritual formation counterparts as articulated by Aden, Benner, and Ellens<sup>9</sup>, in particular the *Adolescent* stage reflecting faith as identity, and the *Young Adult* stage reflecting faith as self-surrender and intimacy with God. The “Paradigm of Spirituality” is what Kenneth Boa would likely point to as influential in this traumatic time in Graham’s life that forced him to trust God and contrast the temporal values of this world with the eternal values of the Kingdom of God.<sup>10</sup>

With a new sense of focus and calling Graham’s ministry began, but progress was initially slow. That is, until another event would once again change the course of his life and ministry. Just as life altering as his break-up with Emily Cavanaugh had been, so also would this event prove to be, bringing Graham to a new and powerful level of faith and leadership. During a trip to the British Isles, Graham met a Welsh evangelist named Stephen Olford who taught Graham about walking, serving and preaching in the power of the Holy Spirit. In a small stone hotel, Olford lead Graham through the scriptures on the Holy Spirit’s power. Over a period of two days, Graham and Olford talked, read scripture, and sought God for the anointing of His Spirit. Olford recalled, “Finally, he said, ‘My heart is so flooded with the Holy Spirit!...We were laughing and praising God, and Billy was walking back and forth across the room, crying out, ‘I

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<sup>7</sup> Harold Myra, 21.

<sup>8</sup> James R. Estep & Jonathan H. Kim, 103.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>10</sup> Kenneth Boa, *Conformed to His Image* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 65-67.

have it! I'm filled. This is a turning point in my life.' And he was a new man."<sup>11</sup> In fact that same evening when Graham preached, the anointing of God on him was so obvious that people began making decision and praying at the altar before Graham even gave the invitation.

Obviously there are a number of additional influential developmental events and factors in the shaping of Billy Graham's early life and ministry. But I believe these two events, i.e., Emily Cavanaugh and his encounter with the Holy Spirit, reflect what substantively influenced Graham's early personality development and his early ministry paradigm of spirituality, and consequently helped set the agenda of his early spiritual formation.

With God's anointing, Billy Graham's ministry began bursting at the seams. As a maturing leader Graham recognized the need for a team approach in an age that tended to be dominated by top down hierarchical organizations. Yet the Billy Graham organizational growth appears to have occurred more from necessity than strategy. In part that was the result of Billy's understanding of his need to stay focused on the specific task God had called him to—preaching the gospel, which in turn caused him to depend and rely on a trusted inner circle of associates for other matters, and thus the team was born. Graham himself stated, “The ministry sort of took off and got away from all of us! We all seemed to be a part of a tremendous movement of the Spirit of God, and so many of the new organizations seemed to interrelate, or began as we talked and prayed together in our travels.”<sup>12</sup>

Studying Graham's team and organizational development reveals a powerful trait—loyalty. Graham seems to have inspired it in almost everyone who became a part of his organization. Myra says, “It helped that Billy's team knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that he was not in it for his own glory. They sensed humility, and they also understood the price he paid

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<sup>11</sup> Harold Myra, 23.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 40.

for playing his role on the team day after day, year after year.”<sup>13</sup> It was my personal good fortune to pastor a former member of Graham’s inner circle, a close associate name Charles Ward who authored the *Billy Graham Handbook for Decision Counseling* and traveled with Graham for more than forty years. On several occasion I visited with him over lunch. During one meal I asked, “What was it that had kept all of you on the Graham team together for so long?” His reply was essentially, “We all knew that God had anointed Billy for this purpose and it was our call from God to help him carry out that work.” Team loyalty was the by-product of both calling and the knowledge that Graham was anointed of God and his “marching orders came from hours of prayer and studying the Scriptures...”<sup>14</sup>

As the organization grew, so did Graham’s leadership. His focus became more refined and His purpose more specific. Having identified his purpose, he refused to be diverted or distracted by opportunities or alternatives, including offers to head major corporations, become a Hollywood movie star or to run for political office. Given his fame, he would have been worldly successful and prosperous in any of those venues. But his mission was clear and precise. He was an evangelist called to bring men from sin to salvation. Anything that interfered with that task was unacceptable. In *Conformed to His Image*, Kenneth Boa has a chapter on “Motivated Spirituality” in which he discusses our identity in Christ and the motivation for our service and spiritual development. Of the later he says, “Laying hold of a sense of purpose can be a significant source of motivation, but the problem is that even as believers, we are more inclined to pursue temporal rather than biblical purposes.”<sup>15</sup> Part of Graham’s leadership growth was reflected in his ability to remain motivated by the singular calling of God for his life. As an example of Graham’s passionate focus on his calling, Myra refers to comments that Graham

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>15</sup> Kenneth Boa, 146.

addressed to ten thousand international evangelists at Amsterdam in 2000. “The older I get, the more I am asked who will succeed me. Well, the fact is that I am just one of many thousands who have been called to be an evangelist. I don’t need a successor, only willing hands to accept the torch I have been carrying.”<sup>16</sup>

I firmly believe that Graham’s focused calling and his motivated spirituality have, through the years, served as a powerful leadership catalyst for both his inner circle of associates and for the entire organization.

The scope of this paper does not include enough space to thoroughly assess all the factors that have contributed to the growth and influence of Billy Graham’s leadership. It is worth noting however that some of that growth resulted from hard lessons learned from gaffes and slips of the tongue as well as Graham’s vulnerability to be used by political personalities trying to capitalize on his name and friendship.

Some of these, such as, his sense of betrayal by former president Richard Nixon caused great pain but also served to call Graham back to his primary mission of world evangelization. But the Nixon incident according to Graham’s wife was the most painful thing he had experienced as a leader. According to Myra, the Nixon experience was the refining furnace of leadership. In fact “The Nixon experience for Billy was the ‘furnace heated seven times.’” Graham himself said, “...when I look back on it all now, it has the aspects of a nightmare.”<sup>17</sup> The Nixon betrayal would certainly qualify as spiritual warfare. Boa, reminds us that spiritual warfare is vast, highly ordered, and complex. It is the supernatural directly involved in the natural realm of humanity. He states, “Those who ignore or reject this reality are ill equipped to

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<sup>16</sup> Harold Myra, 66.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 180.

deal with spiritual powers of evil in the world.”<sup>18</sup> Its effects on Graham plunged him into despair and depression and even made him physically sick. There was public embarrassment because of his extremely close friendship with Nixon. This spiritual war would cause Graham to retreat to his study, seek God and eventually emerge with a no excuse acceptance of his own irresponsibility in this matter, a no excuse explanation for Nixon’s actions and comments, and a refusal to abandon Nixon on a personal level. Ironically Graham’s response to the matter may have served to bolster him as a model of spiritual leadership by demonstrating how a spiritual leader handles failure with genuine humility and regret. In the aftermath, Graham seemed no less admired at home and abroad than he was prior to this “Nixsonian” revelation.

The spiritual warfare of the Nixon incident on Graham, given the fact that it happened in the middle years of Graham’s ministry, should serve as a fitting reminder that the leader is never exempt from battle nor does the leader ever stop growing in leadership. In assessing Graham’s response, I believe the lessons of failure and betrayal caused him to emerge as a stronger leader for the twilight years of his ministry.

As I write this paper, Billy Graham is now in his mid-nineties and physically limited by the frailties of age. It would come as no surprise if this lion of faith and evangelism were called home in the near future. But when his life and earthly ministry has concluded, the evidence of how he has operated, how he has lead and how he has lived will certainly affirm what Mark Maddix calls the lifelong process of spiritual formation and Christian formation. “Our journey of faith connotes the process and passages in our response to God’s overture to us when we view our lives as wholes.”<sup>19</sup> Graham’s leadership and influence is not the result of some

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<sup>18</sup> Kenneth Boa, 326.

<sup>19</sup> Mark A. Maddix, “*Spiritual Formation And Christian Formation*” in, *Christian Formation: Integrating Theology and Human Development*, Eds. James R. Estep and Jonathan H. Kim, (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2010), 243.



happenstance events of his early ministry. No, it is in fact the culmination of his response to “God’s overture” toward him and his willingness to follow that divine initiative.

There have been scores of books written about Graham personally, his crusades, and his organization; certainly, more will be written in the years to come and possibly some will look back with an eye of examination about the greatness of his leadership. In assessing Graham as a Spiritual leader, it is my view that several things will always surface as major qualities enabling his influence as a spiritual leader. Space does not permit a comprehensive listing of all of the qualities, i.e., humility, sincerity, commitment, burden and of course the overwhelming anointing of the Holy Spirit. But there are some things in retrospect I believe that will forever be identified with Graham’s leadership.

First, through the years Graham’s charisma has been undeniable and extremely powerful. I note once again that he is and has been listed for decades on the list of the most admired men in the world. That fact is somewhat remarkable given Graham’s family nickname of “Puddleglum,” taken from C.S. Lewis’s book series the Chronicles of Narnia. Puddleglum was a strong, but often-depressive character that always anticipated the worst case.<sup>20</sup> Yet testimony after testimony of prominent Christian leaders tell a different story, a story of Billy’s optimistic view, his tremendous ministry of encouragement, and his ever-faithful communication of hope. Billy’s associates also speak of his “undiluted enthusiasm” and his “constant air of expectancy.”<sup>21</sup> Graham’s charisma seems to be more the work of his spiritual formation and the influence of what Kenneth Boa refers to as the exchanged life, i.e. understanding our identity in Christ rather than resigning ourselves to the limits of our physiological make up. Herein lies the paradox of Graham’s charisma. His tendency toward pessimism is overpowered by what Myra calls his

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<sup>20</sup> Harold Myra, 93-94.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 97.

determination to live by his convictions and the gospel of hope and to communicate that confidence to others.<sup>22</sup>

Graham's leadership will also be viewed in light of how he has handled the pressures and criticism that have come his way. From early in his ministry on, Graham received not only extraordinary praise, but at times extremely harsh criticisms from the press, politicians and often the clergy. Whether it was taking a stand for non-segregation in the south, hosting the first London crusade, or preaching in the former Soviet Union and China in carefully controlled settings, Graham has been maligned and mischaracterized by many who did not understand the gospel mandate which controlled his life. Yet through all the miles, all the criticisms and all the misunderstandings, Graham refused to compromise his convictions, refused to answer mud slinging with mud slinging and has maintained the highest level of integrity. Unlike many leaders, for Graham, decisions were made not to pacify the critics but rather to please God. As stated earlier by Myra, "Billy's marching orders came from hours of prayer and studying the Scriptures...He was constantly asking the question, 'What is God actually saying we should do next?'... Such sensitivity to the Spirit has typified Billy's decision-making process over the decades."<sup>23</sup> Billy Graham is a model of Christian leadership in the face of criticism. How he has handled it will remain a lasting reflection of the depth of his spiritual formation and his obedience to a higher standard.

Finally, Graham's leadership when evaluated in the years to come should also reflect his visionary impact on others. Harold Myra describes it this way; "One of the most profound effects of Billy's leadership has been his stoking the fires of other leaders beyond his own organization. He wasn't building his own empire, he was building something bigger." As an example of his

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 45.

great gospel vision Myra points to Graham's worldwide meetings of evangelists. He goes on to say, "His vision was large, indeed, and it inspired the 10,000 leaders from 180 countries." To those gathered in Amsterdam, Graham said, "We are the first generation that has the awesome capacity to destroy mankind from the face of this planet because of the development in incredible weapons of mass destruction. But we also have within our hands the technological break-throughs in communications that make it possible to reach every corner of the earth with the gospel in this decade. Let us therefore ask God to give us fresh vision."<sup>24</sup>

Graham's larger vision to reach the world with the gospel has not only made him a visionary leader that inspires other leaders, it has also caused him to be an innovator and look for new ways to expand the delivery of the gospel around the globe. The Billy Graham organization has frequently been on the cutting edge of using technology to help carry out the mission of world evangelization. In fact, in March of 1995, Graham was the first human in history to speak via a sequence of satellite technology to as many as one billion people around the world.

What is the motivation behind Graham's continued inspiration of others, his vision and his innovation? What has made him such a substantial spiritual leader in the world? Why has he been used so profoundly for so many years? The answers offered by his staff are simple. They have insisted that over the decades Graham has remained driven by his vision and his personal calling to reach as many as possible with the gospel of Jesus. In the final analysis, I believe that vision along with the obvious anointing of the Holy Spirit, more than anything else will go down as the key catalytic factors in both Billy Graham's spiritual formation and his leadership influence.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 239-240.

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