# Heroes of the Faith – Billy Graham

## St Martin’s Men’s Breakfast, 12th October 2019, Mike Beasley

## YouTube Clip

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ozx0ZPbyzNo>

## Why Billy Graham?

When we were planning this series, Dave Baker suggested that it could be someone alive today. Billy Graham died in 2018, so he came close.

He is one of the most influential Christians of the 20th century, and his name is well known among those of no Christian faith.

I was personally involved in Mission England, and have heard him preach. He preached in Cambridge at University missions.

## Early life

William Franklin Graham was born on 7th November 1918 near Charlotte in North Carolina. He was descended from Scots-Irish pioneers. His parents were farmers and he had a brother and two sisters. They attended a Presbyterian church.

In 1934 a Baptist pastor, Mordecai Ham, came to the area to conduct an evangelistic mission. Billy was at first antagonistic, then intrigued. He went forward one evening in response to the appeal.

He studied at Florida Bible Institute, where he started preaching. While he was there:

* Christians whom he admired were accused of moral failings – this made him determined to live a life of integrity.
* Prominent evangelicals, visiting the college, spoke of a need to bring America back to God – this was his call to preach.
* He suffered a broken engagement – this taught him about prayer and dependency on God.

His preaching developed during this time and he was ordained as a Southern Baptist in 1939.

## Marriage and early ministry

He then went to study at Wheaton College, where he met Ruth Bell, who became his wife in 1943. Ruth’s parents were Presbyterian missionaries in North China.

During the war he preached on the radio, along with the singing of George Beverly Shea. He also preached to large crowds and people came forward in response.

He first visited Britain in 1946 with Cliff and Billie Barrows.

His first big mission was in Los Angeles in 1949. There were huge attendances, many people came forward including some celebrities, and the mission was extended from three weeks to eight. Missions across the US, and radio work, continued and developed.

## The UK in the 1950s/1960s

Billy’s first large meeting in the UK was at Haringey Stadium in March 1954. There was opposition in the press, and only one Anglican leader supported him, but there were huge crowds and many people came forward. There were telephone relays across the UK and an open-air rally in Hyde Park. He visited Cambridge during this time and preached at Great St Mary’s. There were huge crowds at Wembley and White City on the last day. Billy met Winston Churchill and received an appreciative letter from the Queen Mother.

Billy was in Scotland the next year, and his meetings in Glasgow were supported by churches across Scotland. Counsellor training was more developed, and Christians were encouraged to bring their friends (‘Operation Andrew’ because Andrew brought Peter to Jesus). Then back to London where he met the royal family, who were very encouraging.

Also that year he came to Cambridge for the mission to the University, preaching in Great St Mary’s with an overflow relay in Holy Trinity and to other University CUs. There was some opposition – the college Deans and Chaplains initially said that they had obtained the Bishop’s permission for Billy to preach in GSM on the condition that the names of those who went forward were given to the chaplains! This was eventually dropped. Letters from some Bishops called Billy a ‘fundamentalist’ and questioned his right to preach to the university.

Billy was in London again in 1966 and I have a songbook on loan from Liz Wells from a meeting at Wembley that year.

## The Reconciler

Billy took a stand against racial segregation and had a good relationship with Martin Luther King. He also preached to integrated audiences in South Africa in the apartheid era.

## Friend of Presidents

Billy got to know Richard Nixon when he was vice-president and found Watergate difficult. He had personal audiences with each one of the 12 presidents from Truman to Obama, officiated at funerals and took part in inaugurations (including George Bush senior, which I saw on TV the day before setting of on a business trip to California in 1989!).

## Lausanne

Billy was instrumental in setting up the Lausanne Congress on World Evangelisation in 1974 and was the opening speaker. John Stott was involved too. Lausanne was also responsible for re-emphasising the need for social justice and care for the poor among evangelicals.

## Books

Billy wrote a number of books, including ‘Angels’ (1975) and ‘The Holy Spirit’ (1978).

## Behind the Iron Curtain

Starting in 1977, Billy preached in the (then) communist countries of Eastern Europe, starting in Hungary.

The next year he was in Poland, invited by the Protestants but welcomed by the Catholics, especially Cardinal Wojtyla of Kracow who travelled to Rome to be elected Pope on the same day that Billy left the country. Catholics were encouraged to study the Bible.

He visited Moscow in 1982 and was welcomed by the Baptists and the Orthodox.

This shows that he was willing to be involved with non-Protestant Christians.

## England again in the 1980s

Billy was in Oxford for a mission to ‘town and gown’ at the invitation of Michael Green, and then in Cambridge for a mission to the university 25 years after his previous visit. There was a lot less opposition and a huge response to a call to serve God in full-time Christian work.

## Mission England and Livelink

In 1984, Billy preached at six football grounds (Bristol, Sunderland, Norwich, Birmingham, Liverpool and Ipswich). This was Mission England and is the origin of our Mission Praise hymnbook.

I was living in North Staffordshire at the time. Although Birmingham was the nearest venue, it coincided with ‘Potters Holidays’ so the churches decided to support the Liverpool mission at Anfield. I was involved in the choir and as a counsellor.

In 1989 Billy came again and preached in London, with live relays to many venues across the country.

## Death and Legacy

Billy died on 21st February 2018, aged 99. He had suffered from Parkinson’s, cancer and pneumonia. Ruth had died in 2007, aged 87, after 64 years of marriage.

All their children are active in full-time Christian work.

## What can we learn from him?

He presented a simple gospel message and made it relevant to his hearers, referring to news and world events.

His life was consistent with his message (integrity, no scandals). He never met with any woman alone other than his wife.

He received enough income to live comfortably but not in luxury.

He gave all the glory to God, not to himself.

## Sources

‘Billy Graham - The Official Biography’, John Pollock, Marshalls 1984

‘Whatever happened to the Jesus Lane lot’, Oliver Barclay, IVP 1977 (Cambridge mission 1955)