

A Personal Word

From *A Farewell to God*

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Early that summer, I flew to Montreat, North Carolina, to spend a day with Billy and Ruth Graham. Billy and I had become close friends, although our backgrounds were radically different. Billy was a country boy, raised in a deeply religious household on a farm in the American South. He had graduated from Bob Jones College in Tennessee and Wheaton College in Illinois—both Christian fundamentalist schools—and had a B.A. in anthropology.

We talked long and earnestly about my decision. Both of us sensed that, for all our avowed intentions to maintain our friendship, our feet were now set on divergent paths.

Later that summer, just before I enrolled at Princeton, we met again in New York City. On this occasion we spent the better part of two days closeted in a room in the Taft Hotel. All our differences came to a head in a discussion, which better than anything I know explains Billy Graham and his phenomenal success as an evangelist.

In the course of our conversation I said, "But, Billy, it's simply not possible any longer to believe, for instance, the biblical account of creation. The world wasn't created over a period of days a few thousand years ago; it has evolved over millions of years. It's not a matter of speculation; it's demonstrable fact."

"I don't accept that," Billy said. "And there are reputable scholars who don't."

"Who are these scholars?" I said. "Men in conservative Christian colleges?"

"Most of them, yes," he said. "But that's not the point. I believe the Genesis account of creation because it's in the Bible. I've discovered something in my ministry: when I take the Bible literally, when I proclaim it as the Word of God, my preaching has power. When I stand on the platform and say, 'God says,' or 'the Bible says,' the Holy Spirit uses me. There are results. Wiser men than you and I have been arguing questions like this for centuries. I don't have the time or the intellect to examine all sides of each theological dispute, so I've decided, once and for all, to stop questioning and accept the Bible as God's Word."

"But, Billy," I protested, "you can't do that. You don't dare stop thinking about the most important question in life. Do it and you begin to die. It's intellectual suicide."

"I don't know about anybody else," he said, "but I've decided that that's the path for me."

We talked about my going to Princeton and I pressed him to go with me. "Bill," I said, "face it. We've been successful in large part because of our abilities on the platform. Part of that stems from our energy, our convictions, our youth. But we won't always be young. We need to grow, to develop some intellectual sinew. Come with me to Princeton."

"I can't go to a university here in the States," he said. "I'm president of a Bible college, for goodness' sake!" He was—Northwestern Bible College, a fundamentalist school in Minneapolis.

"Resign," I said. "That's not what you're best fitted for; you're an evangelist. Come with me to Princeton."

There was an extended silence. Then, suddenly, he got up and came toward me. "Chuck," he said, "I can't go to a college here in the States. But I can and will do this: if we can get accepted by a university outside the country, maybe in England—Oxford, for instance—I'll go with you."

He stood in front of me, his hand outstretched. I know Billy well enough to know that, had I taken his hand, he would have kept his word. But I couldn't do it. I had resigned my church. I had been accepted at Princeton. The fall term was only weeks away. It was too late.

Not many months later, Billy travelled to Los Angeles to begin the campaign that would catapult him overnight to international prominence. I have sometimes wondered what would have happened had I taken his hand that day. I am certain of this: he would not be the Billy Graham he has become, and the history of mass-evangelism would be quite different.

As was inevitable, Billy and I drifted apart. We often talked on the telephone and got together on occasion but, with the years, the occasions became fewer. One afternoon in the early 1970s he telephoned to say that he was in Toronto

and suggested that he have dinner at my home. He wanted to meet my wife and children and to spend a long evening talking.

The evening ended earlier than planned; we simply ran out of subjects of mutual interest. As I drove him to his hotel in downtown Toronto, the conversation became desultory. On the drive home I felt a profound sense of sorrow. Marshall Frady in his book, *Billy Graham*, quotes Billy as saying to him:

“I love Chuck to this very day. He’s one of the few men I have ever loved in my life. He and I had been so close. But then, all of a sudden, our paths were parting. He began to be a little cool to me then. I think . . .” He pauses and then offers with a faint little smile, “I think that Chuck felt sorry for me.”

It will sound unforgivably condescending, but I do. He has given up the life of unrestricted thought. I occasionally watch Billy in his televised campaigns. Forty years after our working together he is saying the same things, using the same phrases, following the same pattern. When he gives the invitation to come forward, the sequence, even the words, are the same. I turn off the set and am sometimes overtaken by sadness.

I think Billy is what he has to be. I disagree with him at almost every point in his views on God and Christianity and think that much of what he says in the pulpit is puerile, archaic nonsense. But there is no feigning in Billy Graham: he believes what he believes with an invincible innocence. He is the only mass-evangelist I would trust.

And I miss him.